~CLANNAD 10th Anniversary Art Book~

Trails of Light



Ten years ago...



What do you think of this school?
I like it quite a bit, personally

But you know...
Everything has to change sometime.

So all these fun things, all these happy things, they'll all end up changing into something else.

But even then, I want to believe the fact that I love this place will never change.

But, I...

"Why not just find the next thing?"

Eh?

*"Sure things change, but can't you just find the next fun thing?
Or the next happy thing?
There isn't just one thing that makes you happy is there?
Or just one thing you find enjoyable? No, of course not."*



That's right. Everyone has a time where they naively believe in such pure thoughts.

"Come on, let's go."



A pure heart that
yearns for happiness,



That wishes for the
well being of others,



That strives to do their best
for those precious to them,



Their feelings will cross time itself,
linking them to each other



shedding a warm light upon a certain family......

Contents

CLANNAD

－クラナド－

2004.4.28～

Guest Illustration





No.108
(108号)



Yuriko Asami
(浅見百合子)



Jun Ikeda
(池田淳)



Rei Izumi
(依澄れい)



Eiji Usatsuka
(兎塚)



Ouji
(おーじ)



Tetsuya Ouno
(大野哲也)



Kouji Ogata
(緒方剛志)



Kazuma
(一真)



Hinata Katagiri
（片桐雛太）



Yukimaru Katsura
(桂遊星丸)



Ao Kimishima
(きみしま青)



Akihiro Kimura
(木村明広)



Crowe
(クロエ)



Komoda
(こもだ)



Haruka Komowata
(こもわた遙華)



Sakiyoshi Cake
(崎由けえき)



Sakuraneko
(さくらねこ)



Misaki Sakura
(桜みさき)



Yuuya Sasagiri
(笹桐ゆうや)



Shaa
(しゃあ)



Ayumu Shouji
(小路あゆむ)



Suu
(すう)



Narumi Suzui
(鈴井ナルミ)



Sumisuzu
(すみすず)



Yukiko Sumiyoshi
(住吉文子)



Nobuyuki Takagi
(高木信孝)



Natsuki Tanihara
（たにはらなつき）



Chuo Higashiguchi
(中央東口)



Bakutendou
(爆天童)



Elan Hasumi

(蓮見江蘭)



Mari Hamada
(濱田麻里)



Sou Hamayumiba
(浜弓場双)



Mashiro Hiiragi
(柊ましろ)



Yayoi Hizuki
(ひづき夜宵)



Nonoka Hinata
（日向ののか）



Madoka Hirose
(広瀬まどか)



Rino Fujii
（藤井理乃）



Fumio
(フミオ)



Misakuranankotsu
(みさくらなんこつ)



Takehito Mizuki
(みづきたけひと)



Miyoshino
（みよしの）



Puchi Morishima
(森嶋プチ)



Yuugen
(ゆーげん)



Yura
(由良)



nyanya



Hiroshi Tamaru
(田丸浩史)



GotoP
(ごとP)



pixiv ID: 3089

Yoshitaka Satomi
(さとみよしたか)



pixiv ID: 9927

Fuurai
(ふーらい)



pixiv ID. 16844

Makiemon
(まきえもん)



[yae]

pixiv ID: 84409



pixiv ID 103523

Mana
(まな)



Ui
(宇圜)

pixiv ID 121508



pixiv ID: 135200

Sen Miyai
(宮居千)



Mozuyun
(もずゆん)

pix.v ID 184835



pixiv ID. 297661

Cross
(クロス)



Touma Fujishiro
(藤代とうま)

pixiv ID 304530



pixiv ID. 390104

Amana
（あまな）



p.xiv ID 415088

Takumi
(たくみ)



pixiv ID. 419642

Chisuke
(千助)



Mauve

pixiv ID: 564736



pixiv ID 682550

KsuK



MAHA

pixiv ID 1027800



pixiv ID 1029353

Kotobuki-san
(琴吹さん)



pixiv ID. 1304482

Mizu Umino
(うみのみず)



pixiv ID 1323475

Ura
(うら)



BYOI

pixiv ID 1415691



pixiv ID: 1494780

Shiva
(シヴァ。)



animato

pixiv ID 1564870



pixiv ID. 1996843

Orange Glasses
(オレンジ眼鏡)



pixiv ID: 2175653

Bai Si Shao Nian (´•ω•`)

(白丝少年 (´・ω・`))



pixiv ID 2280581

Popuri Yoshikita
(吉北ぽぷり)



Amayofuu
(雨夜風)

pixiv ID. 2635354



pixiv ID 2831953

lif



pixiv ID: 3438255

Tateshina
（たてしな）



pixiv ID. 4267597

Ekusuyo
(えくすよ)



pixiv ID: 4585898

Chitetan
(ちてたん)



pixiv ID 6891255

Mogupuchi
(もぐぷち。)



pixiv ID 6919612

Koage
(こあげ)



pixiv ID: 1159245

Captain Yue
（隊長）



pixiv ID 4779005

An
（アン）

Official Material





Standard edition package illustration



Limited first-edition package illustration



[CLANNAD Full Voice] package illustration



Dejicomi Bi-Monthly + Vol. 10 pinup illustration



visualstyle March 2008 issue cover illustration



Playstation 2 release promo illustration (used by Sofmap, etc.)



Comic Market 63 illustration



Colorful PUREGIRL April 2003 issue cover illustration



Newtype January 2008 issue Creator's Calendar illustration



Comic Market 63 illustration



CLANNAD After Story OP/ED Themes "Toki wo Kizamu Uta/TORCH" CD Jacket



Comic Market 75 "Toki wo Kizamu Uta/TORCH Piano arr." cover art



Kumano Kodou Tourist promo illustration



Comic Market 66 "Clannad Remix Album -memento-" jacket



"-memento-" jacket (back side)



Playstation 2 release promo illustration (used by Messe Sanoh, etc.)



Comic Rush Monthly March 2006 issue cover illustration



"ai sp@ce" illustration



Dengeki G's Magazine January 2003 attached extra



Dengeki G's Festival! COMIC vol. 1 cover



Unused illustration



Comic Market 68 telephone card illustration



Ace Momogumi September 2003 issue extra poster


MagiQ Premium May 2003 issue extra poster


MagiQ Premium September 2003 cover illustration



Clannyad version (Fuko)



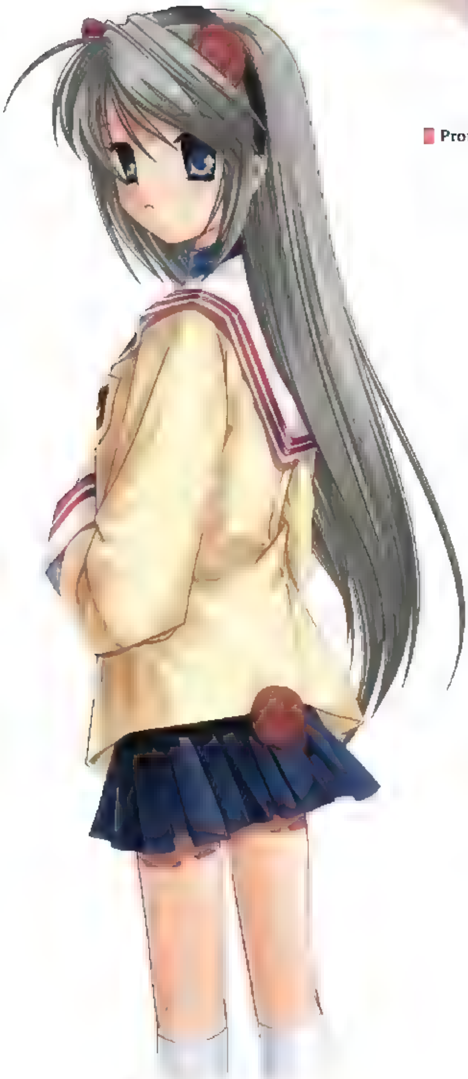
Promo: Clannyad (Nagisa)



Dengeki G's Magazine November 2007 cover illustration



Promo: Clannyad (Kyou)



Promo: Clannyad (Tomoyo)



Promo: Clannyad (Kotomi)





DearMy... May 2003 issue attached extra

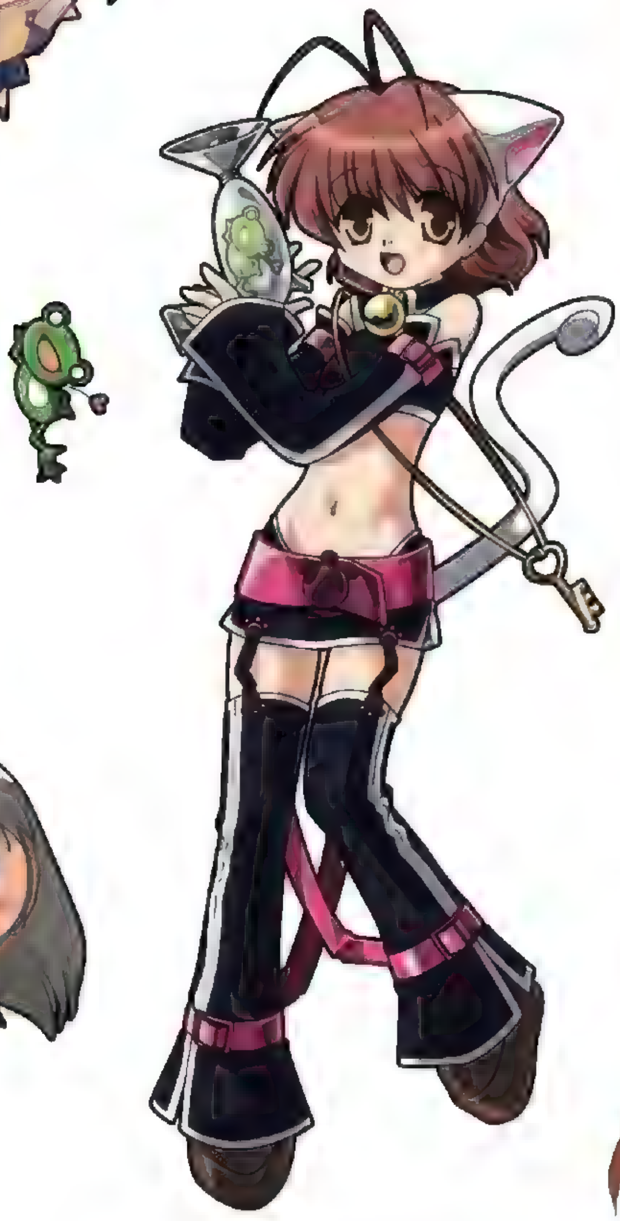




Dengeki Hime March 2003 attached extra











Comic Market 69 card illustrations





New Years Cards



2003 card



2002 card



2004 card



Website game-release announcement

Official Goods Mini-Cuts



Comic Market 65 phone card starfish


CLANNAD
クラナド
下記URLにて情報公開中
http://clannad.PRpage.jp/


CLANNAD
-クラナド-
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Kotomi Ichinose


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CLANNAD

Visual Arts Cards

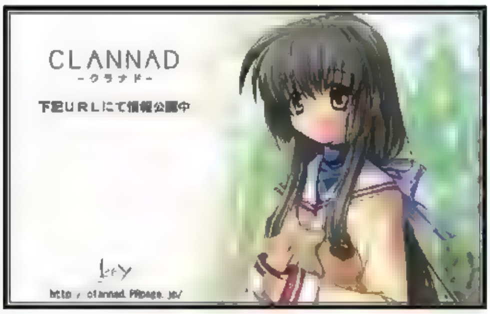


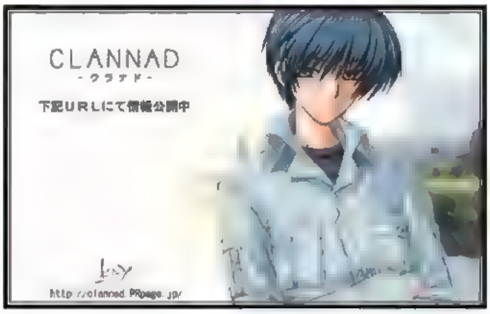



















CLANNAD
http://clannad.PRpage.jp/


CLANNAD
2004年4月28日発売

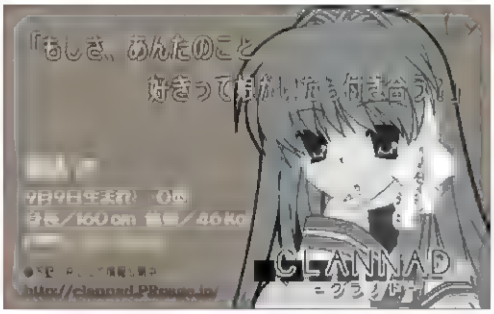

―春。
ありふれた学園生活から始まる、
人と町の物語。
CLANNAD
2004年4月28日発売


http://clannad.PRpage.jp/
CLANNAD
2004.4.28[Wed]
ON SALE


「世界にたった一人残された、
女の子のお話です。」
CLANNAD
http://clannad.PRpage.jp/


「あの、もしよかったら…
もらってください、これ」
伊吹 風子
7月20日生まれ B型
CLANNAD


「…朋也くん
いじめっ子」
CLANNAD
http://clannad.PRpage.jp/

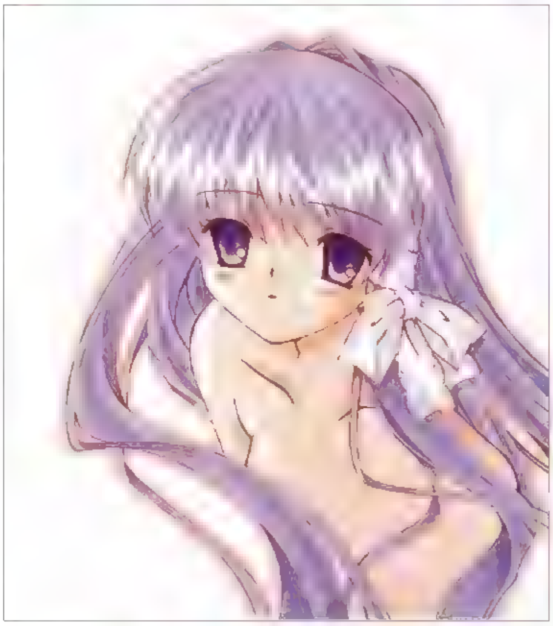

CLANNAD
http://clannad.PRpage.jp/


坂上 智代
10月14日生まれ O型
CLANNAD

Art Cards for Gifts



Dengeki Hime 1-year anniversary





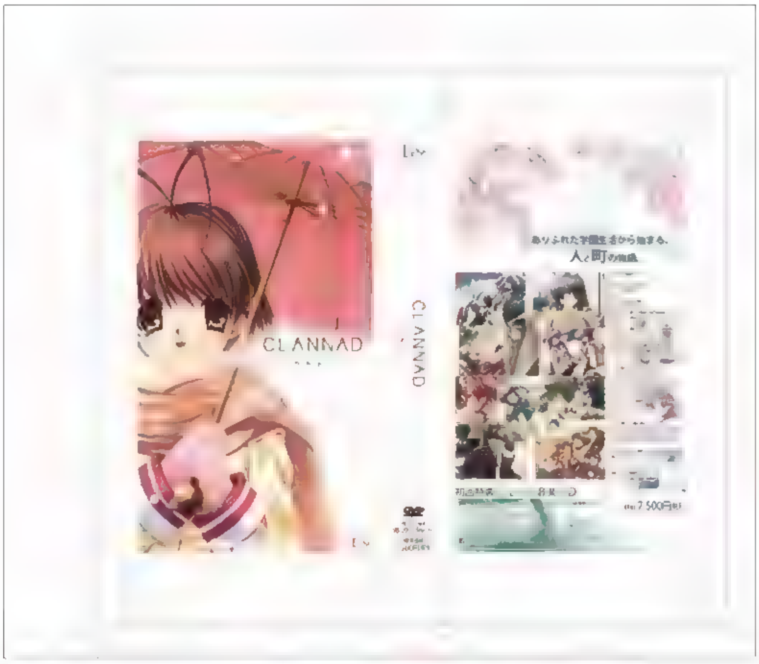
Dengeki Hime 2-year anniversary



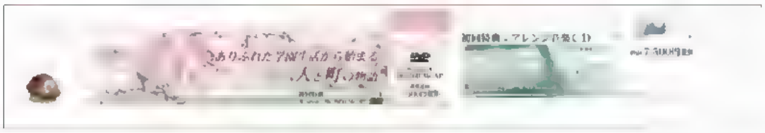


Comptiq 19-year anniversary

Packaging Materials



1st edition package design



1st edition cover sash design



Standard edition package design



Standard edition cover sash design



DVD face design



Limited-time first-edition disk case design



Full Voice package design



古河 渚
nagisa furukawa

- Born: Dec. 24
- Blood type: A
- Height: 155cm
- Weight: 43kg
- B/W/H: 80/55/81





Born with a frail body and forced to repeat a grade due to illness, Nagisa was hesitant to return to school at the start of the year. But with the brusque words of encouragement Tomoya gave her as he passed by on his way to the gates, she found the courage to once again attend classes, make new friends, and strive to remake the defunct drama club.




If possible...
I'd like to remake the Drama Club.



藤林 杏
kyou fujibayashi





- Born: Sept. 9
- Blood type: O
- Height: 160cm
- Weight: 46kg
- B/W/H: 82/56/82



Elder twin sister to Ryou, Tomoya's classmate. She's currently in the next class over, but the instant she senses any danger to her beloved sister, she never fails to come to Ryou's rescue. Fearless to the core, Kyou will not hesitate to be frank and assert herself to anyone, making her quite dependable. She commutes to school via a scooter in disregard for the rule against it, careening into Tomoya more often than not...












Say, if there was a girl out there who had feelings for you, would you date her?



坂上 智代

tomoyo sakagami

- Born: Oct. 14
- Blood type: O
- Height: 161cm
- Weight: 47kg
- B/W/H: 86/57/82





An 11th grader who aims to become the student council president for various reasons. She's a ridiculously strong fighter who won't even lose when boys gang up on her, though this suggests a rather complicated past. She speaks with a mature tone which belies the fact that she is, in fact, one year younger than Tomoya and company. At one point, she reveals her skill as a homemaker when she cooks a meal for Tomoya.








Of course, sadness doesn't last long when you're in a relationship.



伊吹 風子

fuko ibuki

- Born: July 20
- Blood type: B
- Height: 150cm
- Weight: 41kg
- B/W/H: 78/54/79





Fuko declares that she's in tenth grade, but is constantly alone, whittling away at a wooden block. She wants to celebrate her sister's wedding, and claims to be carving presents as invitations to the ceremony. She gives the impression that she's much younger than she looks, though has a tendency to make more serious faces than one might expect. Generally, she's quite energetic and affable around everyone.







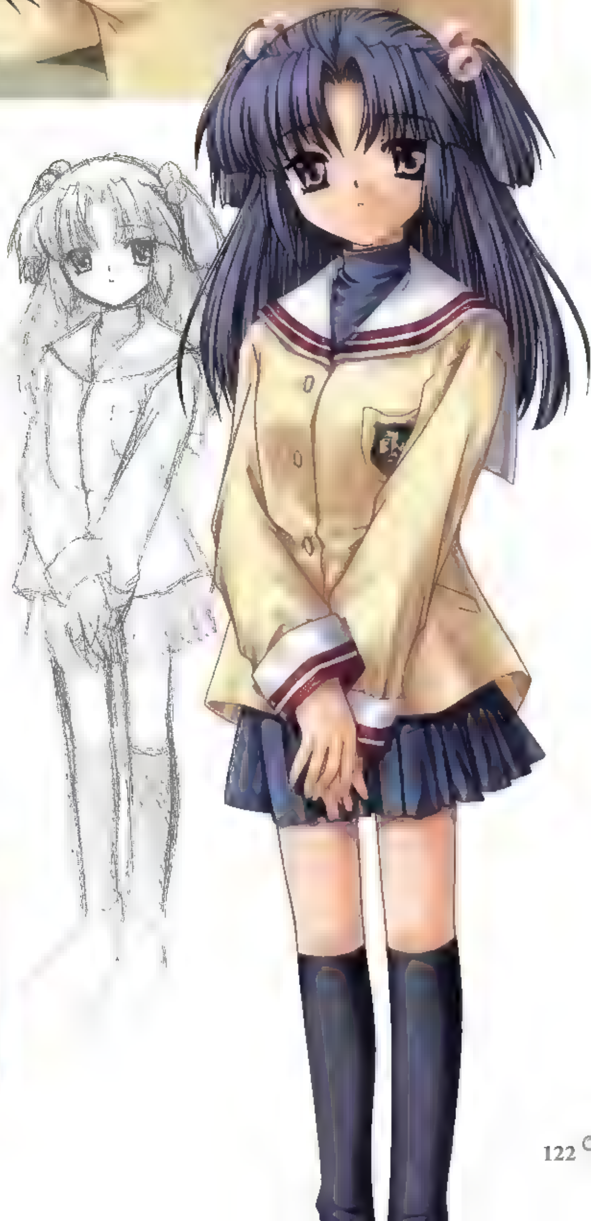


I think I made it look pretty cute,
if I do say so myself.



一ノ瀬 ことみ

kotomi ichinose



- Born: May 13
- Blood type: A
- Height: 160cm
- Weight: 48kg
- B/W/H: 88/58/85









The daughter of a pair of researchers, Kotomi is a genius on a tier far beyond her peers. She typically spends her time reading in the school's library rather than in class. She keeps her words to a minimum when speaking, and generally exhibits a personality removed from the rest of the world. This makes her a challenging conversation partner. She seems to know Tomoya from an encounter when they were younger...













As long as I can spend my day surrounded by books, I'm happy.



藤林 椋

ryou fujibayashi





Kyou's younger twin, and a prefect—committee representative—for Tomoya's class. She seems deeply concerned about Tomoya, whose treatment by the teachers worries her. Ryou tends to be the victim of her sister's forceful whims, and also constantly frets over closing the distance between her and Tomoya.



Nagisa's mother, who looks so deceptively young that Sunohara mistook her as Nagisa's older sister. She also regularly teaches a class for the neighborhood kids.

古河 早苗

sanae furukawa



Nagisa's father, who runs the bakery. Rough around the edges, but is remarkably broad-minded wherever his family is concerned.

古河 秋生

akio furukawa

Fuko's older sister. Formerly an art teacher at the main characters' school, who Nagisa misses very much.



伊吹 公子

kouko ibuki

A young electrician who used to be a musician by trade. His history is likely the reason that he keeps spouting rocker-esque one-liners.



芳野 祐介

yusuke yoshino



岡崎 汐

ushio okazaki

Nagisa and Tomoya's only daughter.

Scouted for the school via sports recommendation, Sunohara is Tomoya's foul-mouthed, quick-to-pick-a-fight frenemy.



春原 陽平

youhei sunohara

Youhei's straight-laced, responsible younger sister. She comes to pay him a visit from their home out in the country



春原 芽衣

mei sunohara



A boy who seems to show up randomly all over town. He's in the middle of a cross-country journey.

柊 勝平

kappei hiiragi



The head of Sunohara's dorm. She's an alum of the same school, and is said to have been a prim and proper beauty as a student...

相楽 美佐枝

misae sagara



Tomoya's father. He and Tomoya can never really see eye to eye.

岡崎 直幸

naoyuki okazaki



An 11th grader who can usually be found in the reference room. Never fails to show perfect etiquette and hospitality to visitors.

宮沢 有紀寧

yukine miyazawa



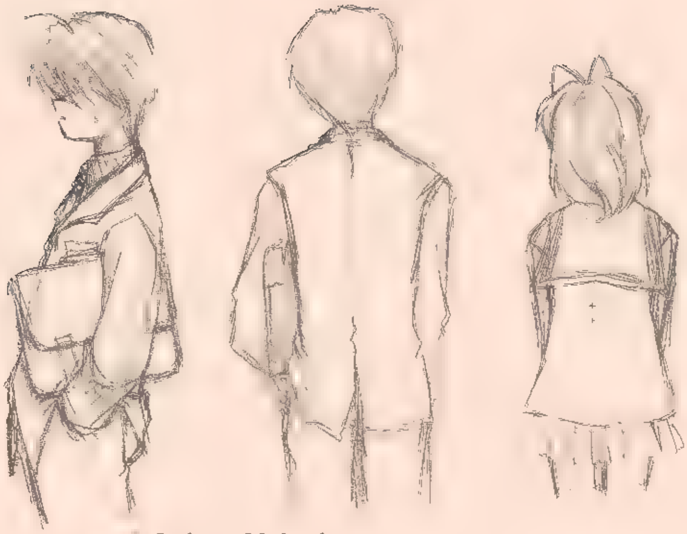
An old teacher who has been watching Tomoya since enrollment. Also formerly Kouko's mentor.

幸村 俊夫

toshio koumura



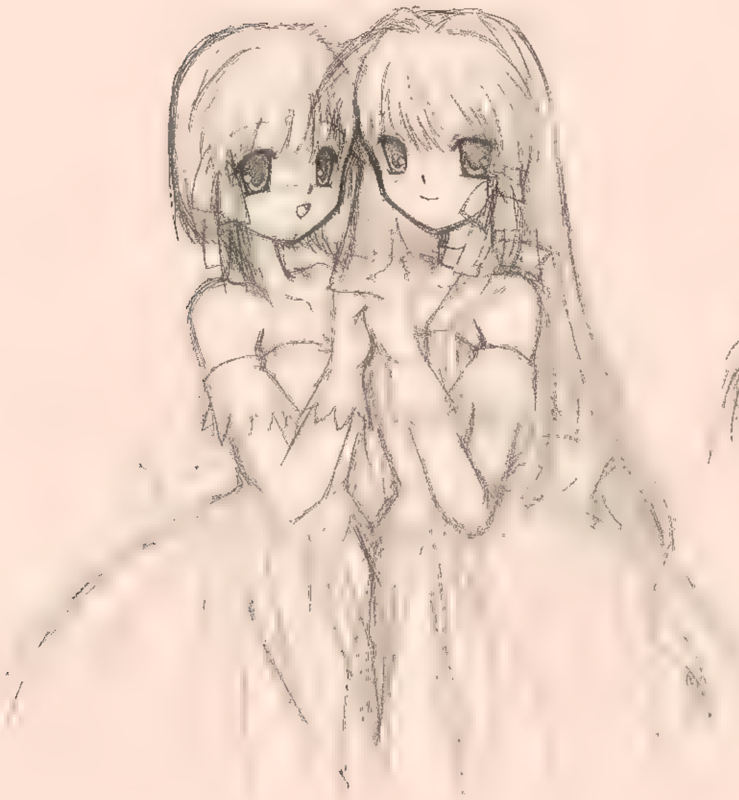
Sketch given at Comiket (one of 95 pages)



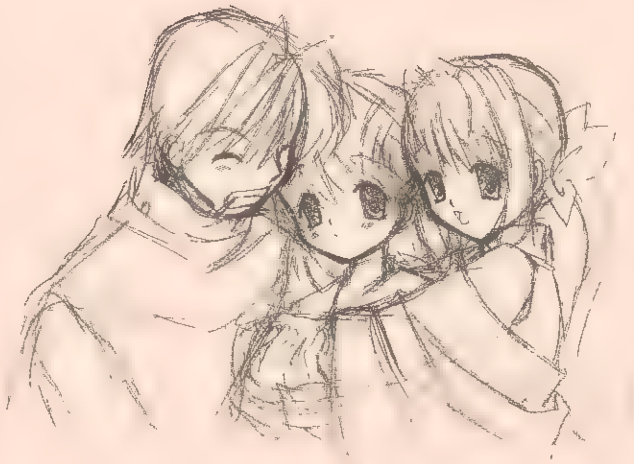
Prologue CG sketch



New Years card 1 sketch



Fujibayashi Twins illustration sketch 1



New Years card 2 sketch

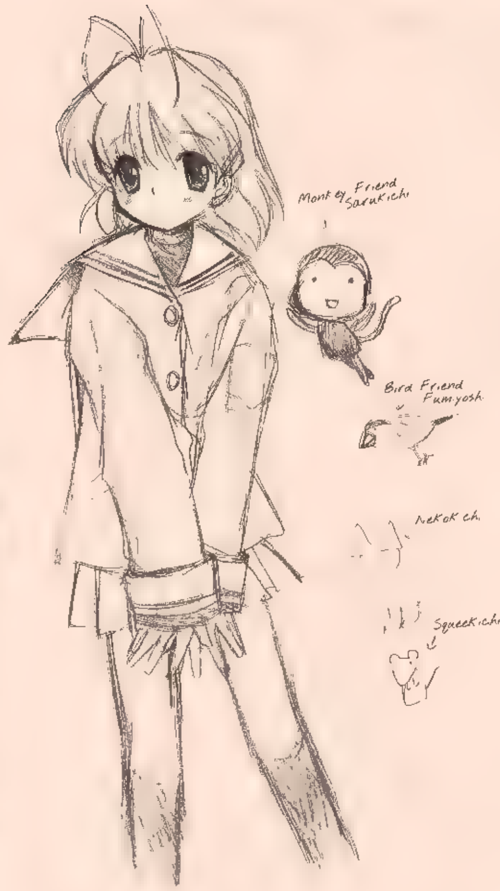
Early Character Designs, etc.



Unused character based on Sayuri-san



Unused character



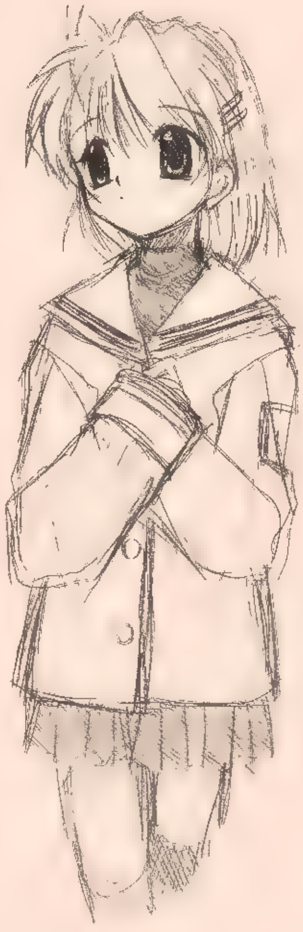
Nagisa pose 1



Unused character



Early uniform design



Nagisa pose 2 (Nagisa prototype)



Fuko prototype



Unused character (protected by a dog's spirit)



Early uniform design



Fuko prototype



Ryou prototype



Unused character (codenamed Chika-chan)



Kyou prototype

Uniform Designs



Summer uniform



Checkered skirt version



Casual outfit



Casual outfit



One-piece version



One-piece version

Coat of Arms Design



School emblem final designs

Memorial Anthology




CLANNAD SS1 𝄢:KYOU Story
See You Tomorrow
Hideyuki Niki
illustrator
ZEN



"I could hear Tomoya's voice, and so I knew I could say that I still..."

After spending a year just living to pass time, Kyou's emotions slowly come back to life as she begins to interact with Tomoya again. But she doesn't know what to do about it. As she watches Tomoya take his life back with the coaching of those around them, Kyou gathers the courage to finally put her feelings into words...

See You Tomorrow

Hideyuki Niki

[Part 1]

I once thought that looking at a map of the town where you've spent most of your life was a rare thing to do. As it turns out, discovering a new store or restaurant here and there can be surprisingly fun.

"Kyou-chan, peel your face away from the map for once!"

"Oh, right. Sorry."

I handed the map to my companion, dumbfounded expression still on her face.

"What do you think of this place?" she suggested, pointing. *"It's a bistro that they built recently. Lots of people with cool interests and stuff tend to get together there. At least, I think so."*

"Oh. Uh, sure," I replied.

I tilted my head, wondering if Rie Nishina was actually looking forward to this as I followed her down the street. The air was uncomfortably humid, perhaps thanks to the rainy season having overstayed its welcome this year. The row of restaurants in front of the station was brilliantly illuminated, completely visible from where we were.

"So... A machi-kon, huh?"

The word referred to a city-wide party held for young adults to start new relationships. I actually had already known that events like this happened around here. I became a kindergarten teacher right after I finished my degree at a community college, so mixers and the like weren't unfamiliar to me. However, I'd never attended any event on quite this scale before. Apparently parties that include everyone in town had grown popular at the time.

When we opened the door to the shop, we were greeted by a blast of hot, stifling air. I'm sure the air conditioner was working, but it likely couldn't keep up with the heat of youth the men and women attending this party were emitting.

"Kyou-chan, over here!"

Rie almost immediately took an empty seat and introduced herself to the men sitting around her without skipping a beat. They seemed nice enough, all dressed casually like it was business as usual and smiling, clearly enjoying her company already.

Where was your high school? When did you graduate? Oh, do you know this person? Oh, how about that. Mind if we exchange numbers?

It's the same process as always. Same questions and answers, repeated again and again. Rie was ever the generous one with her number, offering to go have a drink later and various other cute, appealing responses.

"Huh, so she was really looking forward to it," I thought.

I was caught off guard by how different she was now from the quiet, modest girl I'd known in high school.

"Events like this are a battlefield, you know," she remarked.

"A 'battlefield?'"

"Well, everyone has to find the right one sooner or later, right?"

"The 'right one?'"

"Well, you know how old-fashioned our parents are. 'You're not thirty yet, so now's the time to go find a man to marry!' I'm sick of them saying that all the time, but I have to admit that I do want to find a guy I'd like."

"Have you ever even dated someone before?"

"What do you take me for, Kyou? Who hasn't, at our age?"

I bristled at her lack of tact.

"I didn't think you were really the social type, Rie."

"I'm not. I just know that I can never get a boyfriend if I don't crawl out of my shell."

Rie shot me a grin. Some boys from another group called her over, and she happily floated their way to resume exchanging numbers and such. They had called for me as well, but I declined, feigning interest elsewhere. Before long, a group had formed with Rie at the center, presiding over all discussion like a queen. With her in the spotlight, the party came alive. I, on the other hand, slowly distanced myself and eventually left the bistro.

It wasn't that I had found the party boring by any means, but rather that I just couldn't take being there any longer. I'd been to events like this countless times since high school graduation. It wasn't as if I'd never been approached before, either. Every time it happened, though, I had turned them down for lack of interest.

Leaving the store, it felt as if the city air had grown unexpectedly cool. It was a Sunday night in the sweltering August heat. I felt my body give a single shudder despite being smothered by the muggy air. Although admittedly I was the one leaving the party, I started to feel a selfish loneliness, as if they had turned me away.

I walked by other restaurants on the street; I could pick up snippets of merriment coming from inside each one I passed.

"Do I like this town?"

I said those words aloud to myself. *[And what about my home, my school, my job, my world?]* I thought.

"Do I, really?"

I set about wandering around town, trying not to think about why I started to lose interest in it all. I listened to the sound of the heels of my pumps clacking on the pavement as I walked and gradually found myself craving a drink. The problem was that this citywide mixer made it impossible to find a quiet place to sit down with a bottle. Almost every bar in town was participating, and those that weren't had none of the atmosphere I needed.

I gave up on searching, and settled for a Japanese-style pub with few visitors despite having a "machi-kon participation" sticker on the door. There were three older men with no apparent relation to the mixer sitting at a table, but no others. The place was silent. Miraculously, the counter was completely empty.

The bartender came out sporting a head shaved in spots—a style clearly from way before I was born. He gave me a perplexed look for an instant, seemingly surprised that I'd entered alone. This didn't prevent him from smoothly placing a hot towel at a seat with a welcoming gesture.

"What'll you have?"

"Shochu on the rocks."

"I've got stuff distilled from barley, potatoes, soba, and brown sugar."

"Brown sugar, then. I'll take whatever brand you give me."

He acknowledged in an almost imperious voice, pulled a stunning blue Okinawan-style glass from under the bar, and filled it. I gave it a sip and the sweetness of the liquor almost made me forget the sweltering, feverish heat.

"You sure know how to enjoy a glass, miss."

"Yeah, I'm like an old man, aren't I?"

"Nah, there's real charm in a woman who's mastered the art of putting one away."

I had already tried plenty of beers, cocktails, sours, and the like. I couldn't stand them. My palate simply prefers things like shochu, brandy, or anything you can take straight. Thanks to that, most of my recent drinking buddies are old men.

"The whole town's really getting into this huge mixer thing."

The bartender's remark was clearly meant to fish for a story.

"Yeah, but that's not really my thing."

"Well, no need to push yourself to be a part of it. It's not like that's the only way a girl can make friends or anything

more than that, right?"

"I suppose that's true," I replied with my chin resting on my hand.

The door opened noisily.

"Hey, old boy. You got a table open?"

In came a young man with three women in tow. They were all wearing machi-kon stickers, leading me to assume that they likely didn't know each other at all before tonight.

"This place seems nice, doesn't it? I come here all the time."

He boasted aloud and ordered their drinks. Then the real big-guy act began. Where he went to college, where he worked, which celebrities he knew...that and everything else he claimed sounded admittedly impressive, but hearing him brag was almost grating. I avoided looking at the group and downed my drink, but as the man blabbered on and on, I found myself curious about that voice and snuck a sideways glance at him.

I watched as he made up unbelievable stories left and right in a cheap-looking suit and realized that I had seen him somewhere before. I remembered the blond fool who used to tell such tall tales in high school, and I'd had enough of that already back then. I approached the table and looked down on Youhei Sunohara as I asked:

"Youhei, what do you think you're doing?

*"**Hyeeeek!**"* he squealed, reacting like the true petty-henchman type he was.

"When did you go to such a good school and get such a nice job? Sweet-talk the ladies all you want, but you really want to act all majestic, at least be honest about being a deadbeat."

"I'm no deadbeat!"

"Then what's the deal with that filthy hair? And weren't you going to get a job back in your hometown?"

"I was. I-I mean, I have! I just came to town on a business trip and figured it'd be nice to take a look around, and then I learned about this machi-kon thing going on. Maybe I could meet someone nice, you know? My job back at home pays me pennies and I hardly have any friends there."

He realized what he was saying all too late, quickly covering his own mouth.

The girls with him all stared at me, flabbergasted at our exchange. Without a word, they shot a sharp look at Youhei before standing, ready to leave.

"Uh, wait! Don't you know that in life, sometimes you gotta give someone the benefit of the doubt—"

The girls left the desperate Youhei grasping at straws for something to say and walked out the door. Youhei turned my way with a sullen expression and showed me his bill.

"Well?" he said bluntly. *"I went to great lengths to convince them to come here, and for nothing. I expect you to make up for the emotional damage you've caused me."*

"Excuse me, but is this guy a regular customer?" I asked.

The owner grimaced and shook his head.

"I think you'd owe me more for forcing me to suffer hearing the hundred-odd lies you've spun since you got here."

I made a threatening look, to which Youhei responded by taking back the bill with a deep frown.

"I don't mind going fifty-fifty if you'll at least keep me company, then."

It can be hard to stay mad at some people, even if they do irritate me. After all, it had been quite a while since I had last seen this loser. I spent a while tearing Youhei a new one as we drained an entire bottle of black-sugar shochu. When my sermon had more or less finished, Youhei suddenly muttered.

"Man, I don't think you and I have talked like this since Okazaki's kid...you know."

I had been trying to avoid the subject, but he forced it out in the open. Tomoya Okazaki, our mutual friend, had lost his daughter Ushio five years before. She was my student. I still hadn't seen Tomoya since the funeral.

"You're right," I managed to answer.

Yet I had nothing else to say. Nobody else remained in the bar at this point. The owner was peeling a katsura root for some reason—probably to use it in a stock for the next day.

"So what's up, anyway?" Youhei asked with glassy eyes.

"Up with who?"

"With Okazaki. How's he doing?"

"Why ask me? You're the one in contact with him, not me."

"Sure, if you can call hanging up on me within three seconds 'contact.'"

Suddenly I felt as if I had lost some kind of contest. But in reality it wouldn't be so odd to know that the two would have stayed in contact. In fact, it was hard to say that anyone at our high school had a closer friendship than Tomoya and Youhei.

"You should get in touch with him too, Kyou."

"What's the point?"

"You honestly think so?"

"What are you trying to tell me, Youhei?"

He stared at me, but I couldn't manage to make eye contact. I turned away. Youhei rose and walked outside with unsteady steps. In the end, I paid for all of the drinks.

[Part 2]

Hangovers are an extremely rare occurrence for me. I dragged myself out of my bed, rubbing my aching head as I moved. I had bathed before going to sleep, but I needed to shower again because I still reeked of alcohol. Summer was halfway over, but all students first grade and up were still on vacation. Kindergarteners get vacation time as well, but for me it was common to still have to look after some of them on weekdays during that period. If I have to go to work anyway, it's much more enjoyable if the kids are around.

Once I had arrived at the kindergarten where I worked, it wasn't long before the children began to show up. There wasn't much time before the end of summer break, so I needed to get everything ready for the next semester of studies.

I left watching the kids to my coworker while I met with the director to discuss special lessons.

"Did you drink last night?"

The balding, round-bellied director had a good reputation among both the children and his fellows in education. I believe that to be thanks to his ability to detect subtle changes in someone and say something about it without regard for his own appearance.

"I-I'm so sorry, do I still smell like it?"

"You're fine, but perhaps try to keep it in moderation on Sunday nights."

Thankful for his leniency, I skimmed over the materials he placed in front of me.

"I think the special classes for the second semester should focus primarily on song and dance."



Meaning that the next thing for me to do was to invite various Noh, violin, drum, and dance instructors to spend time at our school. For a kindergarten with no budget for this it might have seemed impossible, but in fact the teachers would often do things like this for free because it would make for good publicity on their part.

"Sir, about this name here..."

Among the more normal-looking names on the list of teachers, there was one group in particular that stood out to me.

"Padlock Squad of Justice, Yoshi Rangers?"

The padlock bit was what got me. Whoever came up with that needed to work on their naming sense. Worse, each member had their name written as [Yoshi Red] or [Yoshi Blue].

"You should see these guys perform. Traditional and classic arts are nice to have too, of course, but I think it's even better to teach new things along with the old! Famous acts and popular songs are also fair game."

The man turned out to have some unexpectedly esoteric tastes.

"Plus, you see how it says "of Justice" there? Justice is an important value to teach the kids, you know."

The principal gave me an optimistic wink and handed me the stack of documents, then ambled out to the garden. I put together the event schedule for the semester and printed it out; the Rangers part was still so eye-catching that I had to look them up. I learned that they were a group of performers who visited various schools and the like, with surprisingly high acclaim. I felt slightly relieved to know that they wouldn't be quite the disaster I expected.

This time the children were picked up earlier, and almost all of my work was finished before the time came to leave. On top of that, my headache was gone as if to let me know that there was no alcohol left in my body. Yet one thing remained at the surface of my thoughts.

"Tomoya..."

It had been so long since I had actually said his name. It got me thinking, what in the world was Youhei trying to imply before he left? It sounded like he was saying Tomoya Okazaki was the subject of some lingering feelings on my part. He was just a classmate in high school, nothing more. It had been years since we'd last spoke. He was the father of my dead student...

I had only visited their home once. He and Ushio lived in a very plain two-room apartment, in a two-story building. As strained as it may have seemed, it was clear that the parental bond there was strong. I pushed the thought out of mind with a shake of my head and left the rest of my work for later.

"Why did I come here?"

Before I knew it, I was staring up at their apartment building. In the encroaching twilight found myself marveling at how very old the place looked now. It was around the time for most people to eat dinner, but not a soul seemed to be home. I could remember where their apartment itself was, but I hesitated to knock on the door, wondering, maybe he's moved. Realizing that just standing there motionless would be strange, I forced myself to knock. There was no answer. I breathed a short sigh of relief and turned to leave when I heard the sound of the door opening behind me. I whipped back around to see a familiar yet frightful face in the doorway.

"T-Tomoya!"

Just calling him by name made my heart skip a beat.

"Wait. Kyou?"

Whether from an after-work shower or some other reason, his hair was sopping wet.

"What brings you here?"

"N-nothing, really. I was in the neighborhood and felt like stopping by. Oh, and I thought I'd like to get in touch with Ushio-chan and Nagisa again. You know."

"...Don't come unannounced."

With that, Tomoya shut the door. I stared at the door, slowly starting to hate myself. I should have thought it through. Anyone would be like that if one were to just show up without any advance notice. Even so, it was just plain absurd to turn away someone when they want to pay respects to the passed—especially if they're your wife and daughter. I had been ready to hang my head and return home, but then the door opened once more.

"Come in and say hi to them."

His voice was so quiet. I took my shoes off in the narrow entryway and looked around his living room. The apartment itself would have felt cramped if not for how empty it was. There was no dinner table, nor a shelf for dishes. The place was spotless—hardly the dump one might expect—but it didn't feel like a home at all.

Walking into the Japanese-style room further in produced the same result. A small cupboard, dining table, and a television covered in dust in the corner were the only furnishings in the room. Aside from those, however, he had placed a small memorial altar along the wall untouched by the light of sunset. The door on it was left closed.

Tomoya dropped slowly to his knees and placed his hands together before opening the altar. Inside, there they were—pictures of Nagisa and Ushio-chan. I sat in a formal position at the altar with him and joined my hands as well.

"Thank you for coming. I'm sure they're happy to see you. Ushio especially loved you as her 'Fujibayashi-sensei.'"

His words were a stake piercing my heart.

"H-hey, you don't have to be so stiff around me."

"If I were actually being stiff, I wouldn't have invited you in."

"...Point taken."

Memories drifted back into my mind as I sat there. It had been five whole years since I'd last seen Ushio-chan, and yet I could still remember everything about her perfectly. I recalled how her parents had met in school—a timid girl who didn't stand out, repeating her senior year, and a boy from my own class who had attracted my interest. Seeing them grow close irritated me, but as I came to know them I found myself loving them more than I would have thought.

Their relationship never felt rushed, but they got married and were blessed with their daughter quickly enough, as if they knew that Heaven wouldn't wait long before taking Nagisa away. In his grief, Tomoya struggled to forge a relationship with his only daughter. Yet when he finally came around, determined to be a real father, irony struck with a vengeance as illness took Ushio-chan as well.

It was enough to convince anyone that there is no God.

I opened my eyes and gaze absently at the portraits on the altar. At Nagisa's funeral, Tomoya's sorrow was on full display during the entire ceremony, so much so that it hurt to look at him. At Ushio's, he didn't shed a single tear.
I turned to face Tomoya. He looked back at me with a calm yet dull, soulless expression. I could see only gloom in his eyes. That was it. Those eyes were what I had found frightful. I shrank in the emotionless stare of this man, from whom fate had taken the only happy things he lived for, whose heart had forsaken even the ability to feel sorrow anymore.

"W-we should go and have a drink every now and then. Okay?"

I forced the only pleasantry I could think of out of my mouth as I stood up.

"Sure."

To my surprise, Tomoya didn't object to the idea.

[Part 3]

Tomoya and I were soon going out for drinks almost every day. Of course, every invitation I sent by text would result in a gruff one-word reply, but that was enough to make me happy about it. Seeing him made my heart beat as it once did before I almost hit him with my scooter on the way to school.

I actually did hit him once.

"Did you find a boyfriend or something?" my mother asked me at one point, but I couldn't even nod any affirmative answer to that.

Our relationship was barely even cordial, going to eat ramen after work or going to the pub I had visited during the machi-kon. Any onlooker might have assumed these outings were "dates," but they had none of the shiny, amorous accent one would expect in a date.

I did faintly hope that someday we might become an item if we continued doing this. In an effort to make this a possibility, I would always tell him "see you tomorrow" when we parted. At one point after we had eaten dinner, I told him,

"Hey, if there's ever anything you need, I want you to let me know, okay?"

I tried to make it sound as natural as possible. I could do anything for his sake. I wanted to, in fact.

"Thanks."

He actually thanked me. But immediately following that, he added,

"...But I don't need anything from you."

He sounded as if he didn't care about the exchange, but the tone of flat refusal was clear as day. I couldn't hold back the tears as I walked home that night.

It was fortunate for me that the fall semester started for me soon after. It was easy to avoid remembering my visit to Tomoya's place. However, the moment I let myself rest or was left alone, my mind would drift back to that apartment without the atmosphere of a home, and the lifeless face of the man whose emotions were stolen from him.
The thought continued to frighten me.

That apartment felt alien, repellent to human life. Tomoya's gaze felt downright inhuman. But I still thought of him at every moment of the day, just as I did when we were in high school. But for all that, I realized—perhaps I had only been humoring my own emotions, without regard for how Tomoya felt about anything.

"Forget about it", I told myself. I wouldn't sleep at all at this rate.

This always happened whenever I thought too much about something. As soon as a thought started to consume my mind at night, sleep would always evade me until dawn. This would certainly make the next day a struggle to stay awake. I drank a mug of herbal tea, combed my long hair, and lay in my bed. Just as I was about to pick up the remote to turn out the light, a knock came from my bedroom door.

"Onee-chan, are you asleep?"

I had almost forgotten that my sister Ryou was visiting home this week. I sat back up on my bed and answered her.

"I'm awake."

"Can I come in?" she asked, opening the door and sitting in my chair without waiting for my reply.

"Why did you decide to come home, anyway? You haven't told me yet."

"I have told you," she responded with a scandalized look. *"I said at dinner that I came here with Kappei-kun on his business trip."*

"Oh, was that it?"

I couldn't remember her saying that at all.

"How was the machi-kon?"

"Not a decent guy to be found, no matter where I looked."

She hummed a sound, giving me a look as if she understood something deep.

"That's the answer you give every time I ask you about a party, Onee-chan."

"Well, it's true every time. I mean, it's not even like I'm expecting the world's most perfect man to show up."

"I know."

She eyed me the same way Youhei had back at the pub.

"It's been around five years, hasn't it?"

"Yeah."

My sister had it easy. She found a guy, fell in love with him, and started their relationship with no problems. I always thought she was the awkward one between us, but clearly the truth was quite the opposite.

"It's okay, you know."

"W-what are you talking about?"

Twins are a mysterious phenomenon. Sometimes we understand each other without the need to use words—even when one of us isn't in the mood to communicate.

"Aren't you tired of putting your feelings aside for him by now?"

"Why, you little—!"

"Oooh, scary, scary. Good night!"

Ryou stuck out her tongue at me and left the room. I lightly tossed my pillow at her, watching it hit the door and fall unceremoniously to the floor. And so, just as predicted, the morning came before I could get a wink of sleep. I sat in the chair in front of my dresser and gazed despondently at the ray of morning light shining through the gap in my blackout curtains.

"Ugh..."

I sighed as I rubbed my head. There were distinct bags under my eyes now. I still thought of myself as a young woman, and everyone around me often told me as much, but they had never seen my face without makeup, just after getting up in the morning. Even I couldn't stand to look at myself in the mirror when I was sleep-deprived.

I liberally applied concealer to the bags under my eyes. I hardly ever wear much makeup besides foundation on work days. Despite this habit, I took more with me this time just in case. With that, I was ready to leave for the kindergarten, wandering heavy thoughts be damned.

For the most part, the kids where I work are an energetic bunch, and this is especially true on days with special classes. I can never deny how adorable they are when they loudly cling to me, but my tired body couldn't take it this time. I wanted someone to draw their attention away soon. Anyone would do, even that "Ranger" bunch.

The midsummer heat had persisted into the beginning of September. I was almost fed up with it all when I saw a lone car roll into the parking lot. It was from an electrical company, a truck holding a work bench with two minivans bringing up the rear. The director walked out to greet them, indicating that he had expected them.

"You can say you're trying to live up to the "hero" role all you like, but mind the setting..."

I had assumed they would at least come inside before donning their masks. The tall, red-masked man directed the group while the yellow and blue ones carried in their instruments. The green-masked man, boasting a brawny build, turned to me and waved me over.

I tilted my head, wondering who he was, until I noticed an attractive woman step out of one of the vans.

"Oh, Kyou-chan!"

She handed a tray of baked sweets—apparently for the children—to the man in the yellow mask and trotted over to me. It was Sanae Furukawa.

"I'm tagging along with Akio-sa...I mean, the Padlock Squad of Justice, Yoshi Rangers today. Let's have fun, okay?"

"I had no idea Akio-san was doing anything like this..."

"Hmm, who's this 'Akio' person? Never heard of him!" She replied with a giggle. She returned to help the others with a bounce in her step. She exuded an air of youth that made me feel embarrassed over the bags under my eyes. She then quickly turned back to me with a more serious look on her face and gave a polite bow. Mildly flustered, I mirrored the gesture. *[She doesn't need any formality with me]*, I thought as I watched the men carry in their equipment.

Their leader was a man named Yuusuke Yoshino. He was once a professional musician, but now worked as an electrician. He was the one who taught Tomoya most of what he had to learn for his job. Even with the mask covering his face, he radiated a cool, suave aura that attracted the attention of all of the other teachers.

Akio-san and Yoshino-san weren't wearing masks, as they were handling the electrical work and speakers. As I turned to go back inside to my work, one of the masked men snuck a second glance in my direction.

I squinted at him, thinking I might have seen him somewhere before. In sudden panic, Yoshi Ranger Blue dropped the bass guitar in his hands.

[Part 4]

As I expected from a group calling themselves "warriors for justice," the kids took to them with glee. Yoshi Ranger Red—Yuusuke Yoshino—was once a rock star who played for thousands, and with that same charisma he led the children to sing and dance along with perfect ease.

Their act was all rock arrangements of anime tunes and children's songs, but the way they performed was captivating; energetic and fun, yet also somehow sweet. Even the teachers were into it, raising their fists and moving to the rhythm. Among them, I was the only one simply watching the spectacle.

There was one band member who played his instrument with faltering fingers, sweating so much as to make his blue mask appear an entirely different color.

The Yoshi Rangers performed way past the forty minutes they had been allotted, even agreeing to the children's requests for an encore before they finally left their stage to the sound of fervent applause. Yoshi Blue appeared to take well to the cheers of the kids, but one look at me made him return to his awkward, unnatural movements, even stumbling on the classroom doorway.

Half of me was relieved, while the rest of me felt mild regret. Tomoya hadn't been doing nothing all this time. It was reassuring to see that he had joined a band with his mentor and father-in-law, Yoshino-san and Akio-san.
Yet he had said to my face that there was nothing I could do for him. Remembering that moment cast a dark pall over my mood once more. Silence returned to the building as we sent the children, all still hyped up from the Yoshi Rangers' visit, back home.

Children are definitely the life of a kindergarten. Every time they leave, staying behind has always left me feeling lonely. This time, I wound up thinking of Tomoya's apartment again. Even as I felt now, I knew I could never understand his pain when the two people he needed at home the most were gone.

Yoshino-san's wife Kouko had lost her little sister, Fuko. Akio-san had lost both a daughter and a granddaughter. They knew the fear and pain of losing someone dear to them, so of course they would be able to support Tomoya through this. I was lucky, still blessed with friends and family in my life. How could I expect to remotely understand Tomoya's struggle when my life was still so happy?

I finished cleaning the room in my darkened mood and left the building. Standing outside the gate was Yoshi Yellow.

"Someone's going to call the cops on you," I warned him.

"Pfft."

The masked Akio-san blew a sardonic sigh and struck a cool pose, handing me a slip of paper before running off in dramatic form.

The paper was a flyer advertising the Furukawa Bakery. A message about a new type of bread on sale was highlighted, printed in a hideous font. I tilted my head in confusion.

"That's not what I wanted to give her!" came a sharp voice.

"Yoshi Red..."

"What are you talking about?"

Yoshino-san, already changed back into his work clothes, walked over and held out a different flyer. This time it was an announcement that his band was playing a live show. Obviously his own name was printed in the largest letters, but in smaller letters below that I could see Akio-san and Tomoya's names as well.

"It'll be a good show. The band's lead vocalist used to be a big name in rock music. They don't look half bad and they play guitar like pros too."

His face looked so serious that I didn't dare laugh at his failure to recognize me.

"This Akio Furukawa guy is a great guy. Plays drums like a monster. And Tomoya Okazaki runs the show on bass..."

Yoshino-san cut his explanation short and looked at me.

"Miss, do you know what the most important thing is when playing rock music?" he asked.

"Beats me. Being energetic, I guess?"

He shook his head. Attitude, skill, strength, spirit, and everything else I guess elicited the same response.

"It's love!" he said loudly

"Oh, is that it?" I asked sarcastically.

"Love is what runs the show," he quipped.

And with that he dashed back to the van in the same dramatic form as Akio-san. I had to wonder if they had come to perform here just to give me this flyer.

I was free that weekend...

I spent the next few days agonizing over whether I should attend the show or not. The whole time, I was laughing to myself. Why did I think that going to a concert would be enough to change how Tomoya felt? But it did seem like good fun to watch people I knew jamming on stage at their own concert.

So I told myself, at least.

I had heard that there was a small-time music club somewhere in this city before, but I had imagined it would be somewhere in the heart of downtown—not in an area full of greenery, as this one was. I also expected a younger clientele, but was surprised to find that it sought mostly somewhat older customers, roughly my age.

There seemed to be no shortage of guests tonight who knew Yuusuke Yoshino's musical history, though I saw no familiar faces among them. This observation was rather discouraging.

"Kyou-chan!" came the call of a soft voice. I looked around and found Sanae-san, facing me with the same disheartened expression I was probably wearing.

"So you did come after all. Thank you."

"Did you come to watch with the rest of the crowd, too?" I asked.

"Akio-san said the stage is where men fight so I should watch from the sidelines."

"What does he think this is, a boxing ring?"

"Well, would you like to join me at least?" she offered.

I had no reason to decline. I actually had found it rather impressive that so many people could pack into this relatively cramped hall, which was only about the size of two classrooms at the school. We took a spot standing against the rear wall, away from the heat and pressure within the crowd.



Sanae-san's long, almost chestnut-colored hair hung near my face. I could detect a sweet, almost motherly scent coming from it. No doubt Nagisa also had this trait when she was alive.

"Do you watch their shows often?" I asked.

"No, actually. This is my first time." I hadn't expected that answer. *"I came because I thought I'd get the chance to meet you again here,"* she continued.

I was touched. What a kind woman. She must have been excellent at calming Tomoya during his more irritable moments back in our high school days. Despite the comfort knowing this brought me, it still hurt to think that even Tomoya's current company may not be enough to dispel his sorrow.

"Oh, looks like they're starting."

Light fell upon the stage, and the chattering crowd fell into a near-silent murmur. The atmosphere itself vibrated as spotlights flared alive and an intense melody signaled the beginning of the show.

Yoshino-san ran the show, his voice and guitar dominating the spectacle and practically shining to match the spotlights directed on him. His music was visibly shaking the rest of the audience to the core. Behind him sat Akio-san, commanding the drums with dexterity and strength.

My eyes were focused on the man near the edge of the stage where little light reached him, plucking on the bass with his face downcast. It was clear that he was still an amateur compared to the others.

"Tomoya-san's become much better at playing that."

Sanae-san's hand found mine as she stood beside me.

"If he were playing any worse, don't you think Yoshino-san would get angry at him?"

"He didn't actually want to play bass at first."

Again, her words surprised me.

"You mean to say he's never actually played in a concert before?" I asked incredulously.

Sanae-san explained, "All he did before was stand in one place holding the thing, not caring to do anything else. That was it. He wouldn't move, wearing an odd expression the whole time. It wasn't until last year that he even started to practice, I think."

"Talk about a drastic change in personality," I remarked.

"My husband was the one who approached Yoshino-san about it. 'I wanna get Tomoya's head back in the game. Why not make a band, with him in it?'" he told him. Yoshino wasn't willing at first, though. He said that everyone has to carry themselves through happy and sad times by their own effort, and that he can find enough help from other people around him.

"And then Akio said this: 'when our daughter was hesitant, scared, at the bottom of a hill, it was Tomoya who gave her the push she needed to find the happy life she deserved. This time it's Tomoya standing where she was, and it's our turn to push him up that hill.'"

"Nagisa came to truly love this town once she met Tomoya-san and through him, you and all of the other friends she made. Before that point, she already seemed to smile all the time—but I believe that was all because she never wanted us to seem anything less than happy. It wasn't until you all and Tomoya came along that she could learn to be happy for herself. And even after that happened, seeing everyone she loved enjoying life was still the greatest joy in the world to her."

The concert continued on with a series of ballads and speed metal-esque tunes. The two older men played skillfully around Tomoya's clumsy fingers on the bass. Not that they were going easy on him, of course—a look at his face revealed not a smile, but strain, showing that his concentration was all but consumed by the music. His bandmates, meanwhile, were almost smiling—kindly—at his efforts.

Akio-san said to him, *"Let's just play our hearts out and have fun with it. Play with the guy Nagisa loved, in the city she loved, and really enjoy every second of it. And then in the end, when we see her on the other side, we can tell her we still had a good life, yeah?'"*

I bit my lip to hold on to my self-control. As much as I tried to keep it in, my vision was already starting to blur through the coming tears.

"The one person Nagisa wanted to make happy, more than anyone else, is the man you see up there," Sanae concluded.

Nagisa was indeed the type of person to wish for others' happiness before her own, but there was no denying that she most strongly felt this way for the man she had married. No human being could ever get in the way of that. Tomoya would always be hers.

I suddenly felt a strong gaze upon me. I turned my head to see Sanae staring at me.

"Now there is something that only you can do for him."

"You know I could never take Nagisa's place"

"And that's why I want you to do what you want to do, not what Nagisa would. Kyou-chan, I know exactly how you feel about Tomoya-san."

I felt my face grow hot.

"Wh-why are you saying that now—"

"You've visited Tomoya-san at his home several times now, haven't you? I go over there from time to time to bring him food, but he almost never speaks about himself or anyone else when I do. Last time, though, he told me about your visits."

I looked away. Though standing beside me, Sanae-san's voice should have been drowned out by the volume of the music. Right now, her words were mysteriously clear as a bell.

"So go ahead and tell me yourself—how do you feel about Tomoya-san?"

I was afraid to look back at her. I was afraid to meet her gaze again. I knew I would see her motherly eyes, kind yet direct and imperious, focused on me. The answer to her question frightened me as well. I had kept these feelings hidden, lied about them for so long. I didn't know if I could ever be forgiven for feeling this way about the man my friend had loved all those years ago.

I continued to avert my eyes for a moment. Meanwhile, the sound of Tomoya's bass started to sound off. Before the bass line fell apart, the other two players changed their style to support Tomoya.

I turned to face Sanae-san. I had seen those same fierce eyes in Nagisa.

"The truth is, I..."

No other words would come to my lips. Sanae-san's expression softened to my surprise.

"You've made someone very happy."

"Who's happy? Tomoya?"

"No. Nagisa."

Unable to comprehend her words, I fell silent.

"I say this because Nagisa wanted to give Tomoya a happy life more than anything else, and now she can entrust that task to you."

This family had never ceased to amaze me. I felt as though Sanae-san had lit a fire in my chest. Perhaps that fire had already been there before, but I was simply unable to recognize it myself until now. Sanae-san had...no, Nagisa had given me the uphill push I had needed.

This time, however, I was going to use that momentum to move forward myself.

Before I knew it, the time had come for the member introductions bands always save for the end. Yoshino-san named himself to the sound of massive applause, and Akio-san clearly had many fans of his own. Only Tomoya's name was met with minimal cheering.

I took a deep breath. I've never stopped thinking about you, I said voicelessly. I couldn't help but to doubt that my feelings could ever match Nagisa's love or the kindness that everyone around Tomoya had shown him, but I knew for sure that I loved him regardless.

I shouted his name.

I screamed it with every ounce of energy I could muster, as if to acknowledge all of the people who had become the friends and family around him.

I then realized that a disarming silence had filled the entire concert hall. Everyone stared in my direction. I glanced at the stage to see Yoshino-san with his fist in the air, then smiling and pointing at me. Akio-san sat behind his drums, twirling his drumsticks and laughing heartily.

Tomoya, looking bewildered, had fixed his eyes on me. Sanae-san pressed him on with a nod, and he sheepishly raised his hand in a quick wave at me. Cheering erupted from the crowd as I turned and fled the building in embarrassment.

The guests soon drained from the hall once the show came to a close. I, unable to move or show my face, leaned against the outside wall behind the club. Thankfully night had fallen, and nobody recognized me in the dark. A sudden scraping noise came from the wall beside me.

There was a back door leading from the concert hall there, and from it emerged Akio-san and Sanae-san. I held my breath, and they kept walking without so much as a glance toward me as if they hadn't noticed me. Yoshino-san immediately followed, moving briskly, guitar case on his back.

Tomoya brought up the rear, ambling with slow, heavy steps. He was bent over from both the bass loaded on his back and another large carrier bag in hand. No wonder he was walking that way. The hardcore attitude I could detect from the man onstage had disappeared. What I saw of his face instead showed that he had gone back to his old, hollow self.

When he stepped in front of me, however, he stopped.

"Wh-what do you want?" I blurted.

I saw his lips move, clearly trying to tell me something.

"S-say it out loud, Tomoya."

" See you tomorrow."

I realized that the others were watching us and whipped around to see them all focused on me. I felt more embarrassed than the moment when I screamed Tomoya's name, but I beamed and answered loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Sure!"

-end-




CLANNAD SS2
FUKO Story
Sunny
Paradise
author
Kashida Leo
Illustrator
Fuyuichi


"I will never, ever, ever forget."
Kouko and Fuko realized their greatest happiness lay in the time they spent together. Ever since they were children, Kouko has looked after Fuko, her precious younger sister. And Fuko's always kept the charm Kouko gave her close to her heart. Fuko's always wanted the chance to tell the cute girls of Okazaki family about the happiness she's found...

Sunny Paradise

Kashida Leo

Kouko Ibuki's early life was that of an only child.

Both of her parents worked long hours, meaning that more often than not, Kouko would return home to an empty house with only her lonely thoughts to keep her company.

Naturally, she was beside herself with joy when her mother confided in her that in six months' time, she would have a younger brother or sister.

"You get to be a big sister soon, Kouko!"

"Yeah! And boy or girl, I'm gonna be the best, most loving sister ever!"

"Oh? Then maybe I should give you the chance to think of a name!"

Kouko nodded at her mother's words and soon decided on the names she liked most. "Kind like a gentle breeze" was the key. If she had a brother, he would be "Fuutarou." A sister, "Fuko."

Her parents shared a grimace upon hearing her choice for a boy, but resigned themselves to it nonetheless. *"Any name you choose will be just right, Kouko,"* they assured her.

On the day the child finally arrived, Kouko's father fidgeted restlessly outside the delivery room.

Kouko had never seen her father smoke before, but now he sat holding a cigarette as though he were savoring his first in years. He passed the time in conversation with Kouko on the waiting room sofa easily enough at first, but it was not long before the two of them ran out of topics for shooting the breeze. He rose and began to slowly pace back and forth in front of the delivery room door in an attempt to alleviate his impatience.

Kouko counted the number of cycles her father made as she remained on the sofa, drowning in the same brand of anxiety as him.

She muttered *"forty"* in the same instant that a nigh-angelic cry rang out from beyond the door.

Fuko, as the secretly-relieved parents named her, instantly became the most precious thing in the world to Kouko. Once she was settled at home, Fuko always gave off a scent of sweet milk as she lay asleep in her crib. Kouko could hardly get enough of it.

The girl's pupils seemed large to Kouko. The round and expressive eyes containing them gave the impression of a perpetual smile on Fuko's face. The elder daughter found this mysterious and wondered what her sister seemed to find so funny.

And they were constantly in motion. Fuko almost appeared to be searching for something.

Kouko initially assumed Fuko's overactive eyes were focused on the tinkling, slowly-rotating mobile hanging above her crib. It became apparent that this was not the case, however. What Fuko's eyes sought, Kouko surmised, was neither the mobile nor Kouko nor any other object—it must be the sky, she figured.

On multiple occasions, Fuko would start to make excited noises and extend her arms in no particular direction, Kouko lightly took her sister's tiny hands in hers in response each time, and satisfied smile would appear on the newborn's lips each time.

Even when nobody would come to mirror Fuko at these times, she would continue to grasp at the empty air above her as if there were something just out of reach.

"Fuko must be seeing something there that we just aren't," their mother conjectured. "Babies always seem to see mysterious things. You were like that at her age. Your father and I probably were, too."

"So you stop being able to see them when you get older? That sounds kinda sad," Kouko thought aloud to herself.

♦

The girls' mother had worked as a schoolteacher before conceiving Fuko, and returned from her maternity leave at the end of its second year. Fuko spent most of her weekdays at a day care, but Kouko would often look after her sister instead.

Kouko had just entered middle school by this point, and she gladly accepted the duty to ease her parents' burden. She was already a far more responsible girl than her peers before her sister's birth, and this trait only compounded itself after the fact.

One evening, Kouko carried Fuko home from the day care herself.

Her sister had grown much heavier, making the task of bearing the sleeping toddler home piggyback-style that much more difficult. However, Kouko loved the feeling of her sister's body on her back, and therefore enjoyed every evening spent this way.

On days when Fuko woke up on the journey, Kouko would let her sister down to allow her to walk at her own pace while maintaining a firm grip on her hand. This time, Fuko never stirred even once on the way from the day care to their home.

Fuko herself had grown increasingly curious by this time. Days when she awoke and walked were peppered with moments where virtually anything would catch her eye, at which point she would run over to investigate. This included cats and dogs, cars, even candy wrappers in the wind—generally, anything that moved would attract her attention.

Normally these instances would terrify Kouko, but on this particular day Fuko remained silent and unmoving, to the relief of her thankful elder sister.

Kouko changed Fuko's diaper on arrival and put her to bed.

"You were such a good girl today, Fuu-chan!"

She smiled at the sight of the toddler's sleeping face. Naturally, there was no response to her words. Kouko admitted to herself that expecting one would be absurd.

Fuko's breathing sounded unlike her usual, peaceful sleeping noise. It was more ragged; rough and shallow. Kouko could tell that it was closer to pained panting than anything else.

"Fuu-chan?"

Fuko's cheeks typically had a spot of bright pink color to them, but now they were flushed a disconcertingly deep red. Kouko laid her hand upon the toddler's forehead.

"So hot!"

As soon as she said the words, she realized that Fuko's entire body was practically pulsating with heat.
She took Fuko's temperature in a panic. The child normally would never sit still for Kouko to use the thermometer, but there was no struggle this time. This only affirmed that Fuko had never seemed this sick before. Kouko grew impatient as she waited for the digital thermometer to finish working. Finally, with a beep, the device's display lit up:
[39° C]

"No, no, no, what do I do?" she fussed.

A glance at the clocked showed that it was only just after five o'clock.

Ordinarily she would have started to prepare the kitchen to make dinner and then waited for their parents to return, but not tonight. Kouko spent a moment agonizing over her next course of action before realizing that the first thing to do was to call the school to ask for her mother's advice.

Fortunately, there was no work left to do at the school so their mother would be heading home early for once.
"For now, just do what you can to lower her fever. And remember to stay calm. You're the big sister, remember?"
Hearing her mother's reassuring words over the phone pushed the worst of the worry from Kouko's mind. She finally could relax her nerves, at least slightly.

Fuko's heavy, strained breathing continued despite the cold compresses Kouko had applied. Not knowing what else to do, Kouko gently stroked her sister's forehead.

"You're gonna be okay, Fuu-chan."

"Just hold on a bit longer."



She gingerly combed Fuko's hair with her fingers, but Fuko's condition did not seem to improve.

"Pain, pain, fly away!"

Almost subconsciously, Kouko started to sing the only nursing-type phrase she could recall. She gave no pause to consider whether those were even the right words to use in this situation.

She briefly halted in surprise upon realizing this.

Kouko was well aware that Fuko's pain was not from an injury—which would have warranted her motherly cooing—but from the fever. Would saying such things even have an effect on her sister?

Kouko recalled when she had hurt herself in previous years. There were moments when she tripped on the sidewalk. She had cut her finger on a knife once before. At another time, she somehow smacked her head into a pillar.

In each of these cases, Kouko's mother would respond to her daughter's cries of pain by rubbing wherever it hurt and saying those same words over and over.

"Pain, pain, fly away!"

Kouko recognized that more than anything, it was the gentleness of touch and tone that would calm her down, yet the pain did always seem to fly off somewhere far away at the time.

Miraculously, the little charm appeared to work. Fuko's feverish discomfort faded, as if someone had indeed extracted and sent it elsewhere.

Still, it was all Kouko could do to continue cooling Fuko down, stroking her head and softly singing words of love and comfort.

Aching with regret over not noticing Fuko's condition sooner—at least before arriving at home, she figured—Kouko mouthed an apology.

"I'm so sorry, Fuu-chan."

Fuko's face contorted in apparent pain as if in response to those words.

Kouko resumed her singing. *"Pain, pain, fly away."*

She repeated the words over and over until the toddler's expression seemed to grow somewhat peaceful. Without ceasing her mantra, the young caretaker wiped the sweat from her sister's brow with a wet towel and laid a hand on her forehead.

It would take about thirty minutes for their mother to return home, Kouko thought. After that it would take a while more to take Fuko to the hospital; she began to consider how much faster it would be to simply take the ailing child directly to the doctor on her bicycle.

The idea was tempting to her impatient mind, but it occurred to her that doing so may needlessly worsen Fuko's condition before they could arrive.

"Everything will be fine," she reasoned with herself. *"I'm still calm and I'm going to stay that way."*

"There's nothing left to worry about, Kouko. You did your job as the big sister perfectly tonight. Good work, sweetie."

After their trip to the hospital, her mother explained that fevers in especially young children can occasionally be acute and somewhat spontaneous. This meant that Fuko may have had no sign of illness when leaving the kindergarten, but had already reached her highest temperature by the time they had arrived home. She assured her daughter that it was impossible to notice a problem when there was no evidence of it, and that it was no fault of hers.

Kouko understood that there was no reason to fret over what had happened, especially because Fuko had turned out to be perfectly fine in the end. In spite of this, a twinge of regretful frustration remained in her mind after that day. She hated to acknowledge that even as a big kid in middle school, she was unable to do more than sit with her sister and repeat sweet words no more effective than a nursery rhyme.

The memory of her own helplessness would torment Kouko for years to come.

◆

"I remember everything, you know!" Fuko proudly boasted in her high-pitched elementary-school-girl voice.

It was the early afternoon on an April weekend; the first day of spring.

Kouko had graduated college by this time, landing a job teaching art at the school where her mother had worked soon after. A year of this job had proven that the life of a new teacher is an endless onslaught of hard work, and this kept Kouko working long hours; she would return home late every evening during that period.

Thus, these brief intervals which the two Ibuki daughters could spend relaxing together were a priceless gift to both of them.

Light filtered softly through the window, leaving a bright sun-shaped spot reflected onto the wall above Kouko where she reclined on the sofa. It left her in a very cozy mood. She was having trouble stifling the urge to yawn.

However, thinking of the end of the break—and the classes she needed prepare to teach—reminded her that she could hardly afford to let the blues set in now.

"Ugh, so tired," she groaned automatically.

Fuko, sitting beside her on the sofa, looked up from the book in her lap and gave Kouko a rub on the head. "Okay, Onee-chan. Pain, pain, fly away!" she chimed.

That phrase has never been a well-kept secret; anyone who has ever lived in Japan has likely heard it before, though Kouko had assumed Fuko was an exception to this. Hearing Fuko echo these words, Kouko turned her head, failing to hide her surprise.

"When I was little, I got a fever, and then you said that and put your hand on my head too!"

"Fuu-chan, you remember that?" Kouko asked incredulously.

"Of course! I remember everything, you know!"

Kouko stared.

"Yeah, I actually remember things just like adults do!" Fuko claimed, puffing out her chest with pride.

"Not even most adults can remember what happened to them when they were barely two years old," the elder explained with a touch of confusion and a forced smile.

Fuko's fever that day was so high that her consciousness would have been vague at best. As far as Kouko could tell, her sister never heard a word she had said that evening.

"I remember it perfectly! Your hands were really warm. And soft too! They felt really nice. And that spell you cast on me really worked too! I didn't feel good at all because my whole body was all hot, but once you started saying "pain, pain, fly away" again and again, it got a lot more comfortable! But you also looked so sad. I really wanted to tell you I was okay!"

"Uh...did you, now?"

Kouko thought back to that night, almost ten years ago to the day.

She recalled the unshakeable fear she felt, knowing that there was nothing more that she could do to help Fuko.

Kouko smiled with a soft chuckle, exhaling deeply.

"I'm super proud of you, One-chan. You're my favorite sister."

Fuko giggled and continued while rubbing her sister's head. *"So how did I do? Did it work? Did your pain fly away too?"*

Smile persisting, Kouko replied, *"Yes, thank you."* She paused, then added *"I'm proud to have you as my little sister too, Fuu-chan."*

The needle of regret stuck in her heart for the past decade had disappeared. Kouko placed her hand on her chest.

The lingering, vicarious pain she once harbored had indeed flown somewhere far away, it seemed.

"Onee-chan! What's wrong now? Does your chest hurt?"

Never one to sound wise for too long, Fuko's face began to tear up in misunderstanding of Kouko's behavior.

"I'll cast the spell on you again! Pain, pain, fly away! Leave my sister alone!"

She began to repeat those words again while rubbing Kouko's chest, but almost immediately stopped.

"...You're a big girl now, Onee-chan."

Her hand moved to her own chest.

"And I'm still a kid."

She looked down, crestfallen.

"D-don't worry about that," Kouko hurriedly assured her. "You're still growing, Fuu-chan. You'll get big when you're older, I promise!"

"Really? You mean it?"

"Of course. You know I would never lie to you."

"Then I guess you're right! When I'm older I'm going to have huge, floppy, bouncy jubblies! I'm a big girl! I'm going to drink cocktails and tempt the men who sit next to me! I'm going to be a promiskus bombshell of a lady, you'll see!"

"S-sure, Fuu-chan. You can be whatever you want to be. But, uh, remember to take it slow, okay?"

Kouko silently chose not to tell her sister that at that age, her own chest had already grown well beyond Fuko's current size.

"I'm glad I got you to smile, Onee-chan. Are you okay now?"

"I am. Thank's Fuu-chan. I'll be more energetic from now on, okay?"

Not all of Kouko's anxiety was dispelled, naturally, but that was not such a bad thing after all.

There were plenty of boys in Kouko's class with a stress-inducing rebellious streak. Several of the teachers who had been there in her high school days were also still working at the school

After thinking about it, she became confident that she could look forward to the job becoming easier and more enjoyable for her in the future.

"Pain, pain, fly away?" came the refrain.

"That's the spirit. So now all we have to do is work hard and keep blowing the pain away!"

"By the way, we tell the pain to fly away, but where does it fly off to anyway?"

The question took Kouko by surprise once again.
"Does it go zooming around until it hits someone else? Does whoever it hits start hurting too? Or do they throw it

away? Is it burnable trash or can you recycle it? I want to know!"

"...Those are good questions. I'd imagine that it'd land on someone else, yes."

"Then whoever has it now must really be in trouble!"

"Uh...yes, I guess so."

"Then I'm gonna stop. I don't wanna make other people hurt."

This got Kouko thinking.

She had never considered this fact before...but Fuko was clearly a strange little girl. Yet that was what made her so adorable, Kouko concluded.

"You're such a nice girl, Fuu-chan. But when I say that, I don't mean that the pain sticks to someone from this world."

"So where are the people it hits actually from? America? England?"

"No," Kouko chuckled. "Both of those are countries in this world. If I were to guess, I'd say it's a world filled with people as nice as you. See, look at this circle of sunlight above us. Feel it. It's warm, right? There's a world one step over from this one, and it's bright and warm just like this sunbeam. The people who live there are all just like you and me, living lives just like ours. That's where all the pain and sadness we get rid of flies off to."

"Like a sunbeam?" Fuko asked as she looked around the sofa.

"That's right, a sunbeam. Sunbeams are nice and cozy, right?"

"Yeah!"

"So in a world like a sunbeam, everyone makes you feel warm and comfy. And those people take on a little of the pain we throw away for us."

"So you're saying there are people who get hit with the pain and stuff we send away? Then that means there's a version of me in the sunny world with a nice body and big jubblies, and you made her feel bad when I had that fever? Now I'm definitely not going to use that spell on anyone anymore!"

"Hold on, now. It works both ways. The people on the other end have the same "fly away" spell, and we take on whatever they send over when they use it."

"So we're unloading pain and bad feelings on each other?"

"That's not quite right. Think about it, Fuu-chan. You have times when something hurts so bad, you can't take it, right? And on the other hand, sometimes you feel like everything is just fine and nothing's wrong with you."

Fuko swallowed and nodded silently.

"People who already have too much pain to deal with never have to take on more pain from someone else. People who are already perfectly healthy and feel fine, on the other hand, just take on a little bit at a time from people on the other side, almost as if doing the other a favor."

"You just said the same thing! We're just pushing the load onto each other!"

"I wouldn't call it that. It's more like we're helping each other get through it, I think. The "fly away" spell just makes it so that we all share each other's pain equally."

"So there will never be a world without pain on either side, then?"

"That's my girl! Good observation. The total amount of pain in the world might not go down by much, if at all, but the least people like us can do is to share it so that the people with the worst of it can feel a bit better, don't you think?"

"So do you think that the person in the sunny world who got what I just took away from you is in pain right now?"

"I'm sure they are. But remember, the opposite is true too. Whenever you or I hurt, it's because someone from the other side sent their pain over to us. When you use the spell, it's not your own pain that you're trying to get rid of, right? It's always the pain that someone you love feels. The people on the sunny side know that, so they grin and bear it for us. In return, the pain we live through is what we take on when they send us some of the pain their loved ones feel. That's why it's sometimes the right thing to do when you take it like a champ if you don't hurt too badly."

Kouko played her explanation back in her head and found it rather haphazardly improvised, but it felt real enough to be satisfied with it. She found herself wondering what kind of lives the alternate versions of herself and Fuko might share in that "sunny" hypothetical world.

Whatever the case, Kouko was sure that Fuko's parallel incarnation would be just as sweet and caring as the real one. *"And that's how our world and the sunny one support each other. Also, the people on the other side are generally just a teensy bit kinder than in this world, so I don't think there is ever really more pain coming over here from their end at any time. It'd mostly be the other way around. But there are plenty of people who are just as nice in our world, you know. I don't think it's a stretch to try and be more like them. Do you?"*

With that rhetorical question, Kouko finished her lecture.

"Wow, Onee-chan. You sounded a lot like a teacher just now."

Fuko gazed at her sister, impressed admiration reflected in her expression.

"That's because I am a teacher, Fuko."

◆

And so they spent their days together in much the same fashion, learning and teaching each other in their own way.

On the morning that Fuko was to begin her first year of high school, she fell victim to an accident on the road and slipped into a deep coma. None of the doctors could tell when she would awake from her slumber, if ever.

Kouko resigned from her teaching post that year and devoted herself to caring for her sister in every way that she could. By this time she had become engaged to a former student—one of her first—named Yuusuke Yoshino, but she hesitated to change her family register, fearing that she may never forgive herself for selfishly pursuing her own happiness while her sister remained convalescent.

It was only through the encouragement of a student from her final year of teaching, Nagisa Furukawa, and the girl's friend Tomoya Okazaki that Kouko would agree to finally hold the wedding.

They reminded her that asleep or otherwise, nobody would be more pleased than Fuko to see that Kouko had found happiness in marriage. She was certain that neither of them could have known Fuko before the accident, yet Kouko found herself believing what they told her nonetheless

Thus, with a ceremony held in the courtyard of the school where she had once taught, with a crowd of former students and coworkers as witness (many carrying star-shaped wooden carvings for some reason), Kouko Ibuki officially became Kouko Yoshino.

It was hardly a stretch, in Kouko's opinion, to say that she learned to be happy for herself again thanks in large part to Tomoya Okazaki and Nagisa Furukawa. Naturally, she was delighted to hear that they, too, had tied the knot soon after they graduated.

Not long after, that delight turned to heartbreak upon hearing of Nagisa's death in childbirth. She recalled that Nagisa's body was indeed frail, resulting in a long period of illness that had forced her to repeat a year of school. Certainly it was weak enough to warrant doubt that she could handle pregnancy, much less a natural birth at home.

She was well-acquainted with the Furukawas through her visits to their bakery. They were immeasurably friendly, though seeing how amicable they remained through their hardship only prompted more heartache for Kouko.

She came to know the bereaved Tomoya's situation—and that of his daughter Ushio—through the elder Furukawas.

Pain had come to overshadow everything in Kouko's world.

If only someone were around to alleviate the suffering; to send it away to that sunny world she once spoke of where someone could bear the burden.

Yuusuke and Kouko had yet to have a child of their own, but it was not long before they began to dearly wish for one. However, they agreed that it would have to wait until sometime after Fuko awoke. For the moment, Fuko had consumed their capacity for childcare.

Fuko, ever supine on her hospital bed, had apparently ceased aging. She still looked not a day over fifteen years old, as she had on the day of the accident.

"Pain, pain, fly away."

The charm had been a part of a regular ritual for Kouko's hospital visits since the very first day of Fuko's slumber.

Yet it seemed there was no chance that anyone in the next world over would be able to shoulder whatever monstrous "pain" had consumed Fuko's consciousness.

A simple truth of life is that being alive is a miracle in and of itself, albeit a fragile one. Even death is not an uncommon result of brain trauma, in truth. Much of the world has its hands full simply staying alive, some might say.

"Pain, pain, fly away."

Refusing to give up on the idea that there was more to this miracle than a beating heart and a warm body, Kouko continued to coo her charm for Fuko every day.

Meanwhile, the sleeping Fuko did not remain stationary.

On occasion, her eyebrows twitched; she sometimes attempted to mouth words and almost babble with short ahs and ums as a newborn might when learning to speak.

The doctors who ran brain scans on her concluded that she must be dreaming. There was likely something different about these "dreams," they cautioned.

Kouko still remembered her mother's claim that Fuko's tendency to smile and grasp at nothing in her early years was evidence that infants may be able to see things that their elders could not.

"I bet she can see God watching over her, or something to that extent," the elder Ibuki had suggested optimistically.

Kouko wondered if these strange "dreams" might actually be odd visions like those she had before she could even speak. Perhaps she was witnessing scenes from the sunny world they had envisioned years before.

Kouko wistfully hoped that wherever Fuko's consciousness had gone, it had at least experienced visions of the high school life—and by now, graduation—that the accident had robbed from her.

"Maybe you've even gone to college by now," Kouko mused idly to her sleeping sister. "You're a hard worker. I'm sure you make it look easy."

Within a few years, this thought evolved to *"You must have graduated from college on the other side by now. I wonder what kind of career you've chosen. I think the image of a kindergarten teacher would fit you rather well, don't you?"*

Kouko spoke to her sister during every visit, wishing wellness upon her sister's hypothetical other-world life with nigh-motherly fervor, despite knowing not to expect a response any time soon.

And so she prayed. Hopefully Fuko's counterpart, in her happier life, could take away Fuko's suffering drop by drop, shrugging it off as a rock does the rain.

Kouko was resolved to shoulder whatever bitter feelings of hardship that her own counterpart would encounter, in exchange.

When it finally happened, Kouko was unsure whether to call it a miracle or a victory for medical science. The doctors certainly had no explanation, and so Kouko was inclined to believe the former.

On the day in spring when the cherry blossoms were in bloom at their most vivid moment, grace softly fell upon the hospital room.

For the first time in almost ten years, her sister's eyes fluttered slowly open.

"...Good morning, Onee-chan."

Fuko greeted her sister in a groggy voice, in a tone that suggested that there was nothing unusual to her about the situation.

Doctors came to ask her questions once lucidity returned to her, mostly about the things she saw while she slept.

"I played a whole lot the whole time. School was really fun!" she answered bluntly. Kouko, unlike the doctors, found nothing particularly outlandish about her response.

Scans and tests indicated that no brain damage remained from the accident, though her muscles had atrophied considerably during her decade spent immobile. The physical therapy to follow would keep her bound to the hospital through the entirety of the summer.

When autumn was upon them, Kouko finally became reacquainted with a friend from years ago—and a new face was tagging along when she did.

Crossing paths with Tomoya Okazaki was a stroke of good fortune in and of itself; even more so upon meeting his daughter Ushio for the first time. Kouko had been curious about how Tomoya was handling life after the loss of his wife Nagisa, but wouldn't dare presume to ask the Furukawas about the state of his affairs.

It seemed that even Tomoya, despite having fallen apart in grief for a time, had pulled himself together and looked the part of a real father living happily with his daughter.

Perhaps someone else out there had taken on Tomoya and Ushio's suffering bit by bit until they too could feel happiness again, Kouko thought.

Contact with other people was proving instrumental in Fuko's rehabilitation. Even if Kouko were to do away with that pretext, Fuko would have taken to Ushio extremely well all the same.

Once Fuko had met the little girl, Kouko soon became used to hearing her sister dash out of the house while yelling over her shoulder, *"I'm going to visit Ushio-chan!"*

※

"Mmm! Ushio-chan, I'm here to take you home with me!"

Fuko flew through the front door, loudly blurting her usual daily greeting.

"Pipe down, you. Ushio's sleeping right now."

Tomoya grumbled at Fuko in response, not moving from his seat where Ushio lay upon his lap. Ushio was indeed fast asleep with her face pressed against his leg.

"Does Ushio-chan like to be picked up frontways, or ride piggyback? I'll take her home whichever way she wants!"

"Did you hear a word of what I just said?"

The season smoothly rolled into mid-autumn. Cooler winds finally began to blow through the town, and the time to prepare the household for winter was fast approaching.

For now, though, the weather remained seasonably balmy—what is often called an "Indian summer" in English. Comparing this period to any part of summer would be ridiculous; even the sun's rays imparted a deep feeling of comfort rather than the harsh summertime heat from prior months.

It had been roughly a month since Fuko had made a habit of visiting Tomoya's house. In fact, it was virtually guaranteed that she would show up each weekend.

Sunny Paradise

Kashida Leo

Fuko had come to treat the apartment with the same familiarity and comfort as her own home. More often than not, the young woman would suddenly burst in, not even saying a word in greeting before seeking her preschool-age friend. No matter Tomoya's protests, Fuko never gave up on the idea of stealing her away for herself.

Ordinarily, one looking from the outside might find it a matter of mild concern that a young woman Fuko's age would visit the Okazaki house alone, suspecting some form of romance between the two, but in the case of Fuko and Tomoya there was not even a shadow of any such relationship.

The reasons for this most likely were the combination of Tomoya's unshakeable memory of his late wife, plus the fact that Fuko had the personality and naïveté of someone who had spent ten whole years out of touch with the world. For Fuko, these visits to the Okazakis' apartment which she seemed to so dearly crave were synonymous with the rehabilitation her body needed.

Tomoya and the younger Ibuki were, despite this, still only recent acquaintances at most.

Yet there was a layered, deep bond between him and the elder sister. First of all, it was from Kouko that he had first heard of Fuko's coma before she awoke.

Tomoya's late wife Nagisa was once Kouko's student. That relationship led to the two of them convincing her to hold her own wedding at the school.

On top of that, her husband—Yuusuke Yoshino—would later become Tomoya's superior at his job post-graduation. The couple decided to give Tomoya ample space to grieve on his own after Nagisa's death, but it was their reunion after Fuko's return to consciousness that made it possible for the unlikely-yet-radiant friendship between the two girls. Age was hardly even a factor.

"Sorry to turn you down after coming all this way, Fuko. I don't think Ushio slept very well last night. She was yawning all morning and she straight up conked out on me just now. My lap is hardly comfortable, but I guess it didn't matter."

Tomoya gave a forced smile.

"Nothing I can do about that. I'll wait until she wakes up. Since I'm here, though, please make me something to eat while I wait, Okazaki-san."

"Well, aren't you imperious for an uninvited guest. Hate to disappoint, but if I get up she'll roll off my lap and wake up."

"I'm hungry."

"Then you'll have to suck it up for a bit."

"How long is a 'bit'?"

"However long it takes Ushio to wake up on her own."

"And how long will it be before she does?"

"What makes you think I know that? She only went out around a half-hour ago."

"I see. Then it'd be a shame to wake her up just yet. Hmmmmm. Okay, here's my plan. I'll take your place as Ushio-chan's pillow. Okay, Ushio-chan. C'mon!"

She assumed a formal sitting position and patted her thighs at Ushio invitingly.

"Just a reminder—sleeping people can't hear you."

"But between your hard, smelly legs and my soft, thin, light, straight, radish-esque thighs, it's clear who has the superior assets."

"I don't even know where to start with my rebuttal to that. I guess I'll lead off with saying that 'radish-esque' is definitely not a positive way to describe your thighs."

"What? Doesn't the phrase mean they've got adult, womanly charm? Like, they grab your attention like the little kick you get from the taste of a mouthful of grated radish?"

"Who in the world taught you such an outlandish definition?"

"My sister said so. And to be frank, if one of you is lying, there's no question of who it is. Try all you want to deceive me, but it'll never work."

"Jeez, Kouko-san, that's just mean. But whatever, it doesn't matter."

"This is beside the point. Please make me some food."

"Ugh....okay, fine. It's almost lunch time anyway. Maybe we should wake her up for a bit."

Tomoya began to lightly poke Ushio's forehead as he spoke to her.

"Hey, Ushio. Fuko's here. Aren't you gonna wake up and say hi?"

"Oh no, this is that child abuse thing I've heard about! You're beating your daughter, Okazaki-san! I'm going to have to take protective custody of her!"

Fuko (seemingly deliberately) raised her voice for just these three sentences.

"Whoa, now. Don't you go shouting things like that loud enough for the neighbors to hear. What would you do if you caused some kind of misunderstanding, huh? It's bad enough that they talk behind my back about how I don't emote like a real father and all that."

"I'm obviously being loud precisely to that end. If a social worker came to put Ushio-chan in foster care, then I'd be the first one to adopt her."

"You've learned some very specific things about society since you woke up."

"I watch the news. It's what we refined adults do."

It was difficult to retort on the rare occasion that Fuko said something accurate.

Their raised voices , as reason would lead one to expect, did eventually rouse Ushio from her nap. She mumbled something incomprehensible as she opened her eyes. She slowly turned her body upright and automatically assumed a formal sitting position to mirror Fuko.

"G'monig," came her groggy, tired greeting.

"Hmmmm, Ushio's awake. Good. I'll take her home now."

"Will you please drop that dumb joke already?"

"Hello, Fuko Onee-chan."

"Hello to you too. I've come to play again."

"Come in an' make yourshef at home."

Though Tomoya had skipped most of his lessons to Ushio on manners, her grandmother Sanae had picked up the slack with fervor and mastery befitting her experience as a mother.

"Okay, Okazaki-san, it's time for you to make us lunch. I'll be playing with Ushio-chan if you need me."

"Going with fried rice. Any objections?" Tomoya asked over his shoulder as he opened the refrigerator.

"I don't mind, as long as you leave out the peppers..."

"Picky eaters never grow big and strong, you know."

"Then you can put my share of the peppers onto your plate, Okazaki-san."

"Nah, I don't really need to get any bigger than I already am. And wait, aren't you and I technically the same age?"

"How rude. I'm not an old bag of skin like you yet. See how young I look? I'm like a swaggerish auntie. A well-aged kogal!"

"Those terms are not only outdated, but also totally wrong."

"I'm a trendy girl at heart. I'm hip, I'm young, I'm 'now'!"

"Okay, you're just trying to get on my nerves, aren't you?"

"What does it matter? Why aren't you hurrying up with the food? Ushio-chan, your tummy feels all rumbly, doesn't it?"

"Mmhmm!"

Fuko dragged Ushio into her antics without hesitation, though the latter was clearly still half-asleep. Her eyes fluttered open and shut, eyelids weighing heavy in the fog of fatigue.

"Well, whatever. You won't be getting a five-star meal, but yeah, I'll feed you. Just wait a few minutes."

"I don't mind that. You never make five-star food anyway, so I'm used to it."

"How does that condescending attitude come so naturally to you?"

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Lunch was noisy, as usual. When they finished, Tomoya saw Ushio rise with him as he moved to clean the table.

"I'm gonna cwean up."

"Okay. Good idea. Let's do it together, okay?"

"'kay!"

Ushio nodded excitedly.

Tomoya was unsure whether or not this was something she had picked up in kindergarten; whatever the cause, Ushio now wanted to participate in post-meal cleanup. She could do very little at that age, but seeing that she had already grown up this much greatly pleased Tomoya.

"You can do it, Ushio-chan!"

"Hey, get up and do your part too," Tomoya barked at Fuko.

"Okazaki-san, I am your guest. I can't believe you'd tell a guest to clean up after lunch. You're such a thoughtless man."

"'Thoughtless' is the last word I ever want to hear you call me, Fuko. I mean, I guess asking you to help is practically begging for you to break dishes and whatnot. Ushio is a much bigger help than you'd ever be."

"You're such a rude man, Okazaki-san. I'll have you know that I'm a dishwashing pro. My evaluations in my neighborhood always say I'm like a machine because I'm just that good."

Tomoya, silently wondering who in the world would evaluate their neighbors' dishwashing, slowly followed Ushio into the kitchen.

Ushio brought a stool and stood on it to elevate herself to the counter. Tomoya came to stand beside her and washed each dish as his daughter handed them to him in an effective (if simple) assembly line.

"Washed" was something of a stretch, of course, as many of the dishes needed little more than a rinse with hot water. The task was simple enough that Tomoya would have finished it more quickly by himself, but Ushio had asked to do it herself. Why tell her no? Besides, she would have to learn to offer and do that herself soon enough, and she certainly would be tall enough to do it in due time.

"Okazaki-san, where do you keep your suitcase?"

Fuko's voice echoed from the other room.

"Where did that question come from?"

Tomoya asked in response without turning off the faucet.

"I'm going on a trip with Ushio-chan. I need to get ready and pack."

"No, you're not."

"Now's the time to make things happen! I'm an adult, and I know how to make decisions when it counts!"

"We call what you're thinking of 'acting on a whim.' Cool it."

"Let's see...people say the leaves are really pretty in Kyoto this time of year. Yeah, we'll go there."

"Okay, now you sound more like an old lady than the 'adult' you call yourself."

"Mmm, you're just an obstinate, uncultured man who doesn't understand Japanese aesthetics."

"Those...are some surprisingly advanced words to hear coming from you, Fuko."

"Once we leave for Kyoto, it'll be like Ushio and I are eloping!"

"Would it kill you to listen for once?"

"We'll flee from the persecution of those who oppose our relationship, escaping somewhere even further north than Cape Tappi!"

"Didn't you just say you were going to Kyoto?"

"I saw a soap opera yesterday where a couple did that. They were out of places to run, and at the end they were standing at the tip of the cape, overlooking the stormy sea in front of them."

"Yeah, that's not happening on my watch. You can go there by yourself."

Tomoya was growing tired of responding to all of Fuko's nonsense for the day.

Absorbed in his back-and-forth with Fuko, Tomoya failed to grab a teacup as Ushio passed it to him.

The cup dropped to the floor with a loud crash, followed immediately by a sharp cry from Ushio.

"Ushio!" shouted Tomoya.

He turned to face her in an instant, heart pierced with worry, to see that she had fallen from the stool onto her rear.

Pieces of the cup were strewn all around where she sat.

"Don't move, Ushio. You'll get cut. Are you okay? Did it hurt you?" The father spouted all of his questions at once.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Ushio choked through her tears.

"What, about the teacup? I don't care about the cup. Are you sure you're not hurt anywhere? Fuko, come here and help with the broken pieces. The broom and dustpan are in the closet."

"Is Ushio-chan okay?" Fuko asked, running into the room with broom and dustpan already in hand.

"My finger hurts."

Tomoya inspected Ushio's right index finger and noticed a drop of blood slowly expanding from a cut. As he suspected, a shard of the cup had grazed her.

He sighed in relief to see that she had no worse injuries from the fall. If he had cut himself this way he would probably briefly suck on it and leave it alone, but treating Ushio the same way was unthinkable.

"Okay, I'll take care of it. Fuko, I'll leave cleaning up to you. Ushio, don't move from that spot."

Tomoya stepped carefully around the mess and reached into the cupboard containing the first-aid kit as Fuko obediently swept the floor around Ushio.

"Damn it," Tomoya mumbled.

There were no bandages in the first-aid kit. It seemed Tomoya had used the last one earlier.

He would need to run to the nearby convenience store to buy more, though it would take some time.

"What's taking so long, Okazaki-san?"

Tomoya turned to see Fuko, already done sweeping, peering at him with anxious eyes.

Ushio sat next to her cradling her hand. Her face showed great effort to withstand the urge to cry in pain.

Tomoya explained the problem to Fuko.

She nodded in understanding. *"Okay then. Leave Ushio to me."*

Tomoya almost expected her to reveal that she was carrying bandages of her own—as most women her age would—but that was not the case.

"Pain, pain, fly away! Pain, pain, fly away!"

Fuko quietly cooed the phrase repeatedly over Ushio, gently rubbing her forehead.

"Hey, do you ever take things seriously—" Tomoya began to admonish Fuko, before realizing that she did indeed appear completely serious.

"This is a magic spell my sister taught me. It works really, really well. Don't interrupt me, please."

"O-okay," Tomoya shrank back.

"Actually, Okazaki-san, while I'm at work here, you might as well be useful and go buy some bandages."

"O-oh, yeah. Sure, I'll do that. Hold on until I get back, Ushio."

"Okay. It hurts a little less now," Ushio replied with a smile.

Tomoya ran himself ragged to and from the convenience store. As quickly as he had made the trip, it still had taken him at least ten minutes, he figured. He cursed himself for letting the fitness he had in high school escape him.

"Ushio!" He shouted as he burst through the front door of the apartment. His anxiety had returned to full strength while away, despite knowing how minor the cut was.

"Shhh," Fuko scolded him in response with a finger placed over her mouth.

"Ushio-chan's asleep now."

He looked down to see that Ushio was, in fact, fast asleep on Fuko's lap. Tomoya's body involuntarily went slack at the sight of his daughter's calm visage.

He breathed a sigh. *"Well...that's good."*

He inspected Ushio's wound. The blood had already stopped flowing and had dried into a fresh scab. A simple bandage was in order just in case, but he had no intention of waking Ushio just for that.

"Ushio-chan has been very tired today."

Tomoya agreed, supposing that her sleepiness had returned immediately once the pain had subsided. Ushio was already asleep when Fuko first arrived before lunch, so it was a given that she would become drowsy after lunch.

"Then I guess I'll let her stay like that with you for now."

"I'd like to take her home when I leave, too."

"The answer's still no."

"...Ushio-chan is really cute, though."

Fuko pleasantly mused as she lightly stroked Ushio's hair.

"Isn't she heavy?"

Tomoya had already come to notice that as Ushio grew in size, acting as her pillow for extended periods now required some willpower on his part.

"No, I'm fine. I'm actually having a lot of fun right now."

"I'm glad you can handle it, then." Tomoya paused. *"I can't believe I forgot to refill the first-aid kit. I swore I'd be a responsible father to her, and look at me."*

"I agree. You're a failure as a parent, Okazaki-san. I'll take Ushio-chan into my custody instead."

"Hey that's...well, maybe you have a point."

Tomoya held his tongue, reflecting on how he had lived over the years following Nagisa's passing.

"Okazaki-san?" Fuko called, puzzled.

"You might be right. Maybe I am a failure as a parent."

Tomoya mumbled the words as if he were sick to his stomach.

"N-no, that's not true!" Fuko hurriedly denied his words, backtracking in mild panic while shaking her head.

"Ushio-chan loves her daddy more than anyone else! I'm sorry for saying that just now. And I'm sorry for everything I said when you were washing dishes, too."

Tomoya was taken aback. *"What am I hearing? Do you actually care about me now?"*

"Th-that's not what I'm getting at." Fuko pouted with a slight blush and turned away.

"By the way, what's with that thing you were chanting? The one you said Kouko taught you."

"You mean 'pain, pain, fly away?' Yeah, it's a little spell she taught me when I was a kid. They're the magic words that make anyone hurt a little less."

"Are they, now?" Tomoya asked skeptically.

Every person in Japan knew those words, he was sure.

"Where do you think the pain goes when it flies away, Okazaki-san?"

"Where the pain goes? I've never really thought that far before."

"Oho, you haven't? Well, I happen to know for a fact where it goes."

And so Fuko explained what Kouko had told her.

She spared no detail about the doppelgangers in a sunny parallel world who shoulder the pain of the real world, distributing it evenly.

"So it's not that we're forcing others to take our pain, but that we're sharing it equally. Huh. Yeah, that sounds like something Kouko would say."

Tomoya imagined Kouko smiling kindly and telling the same story. It seemed convincing enough for children, he thought.

The apartment was filled with the early-afternoon autumn light coming through the window. It carried with it a cozy and warm feeling, unlike its spring counterpart, even in such a small home.

"I can still remember a bit from the time when I was asleep at the hospital."

Tomoya had yet to hear any details about the decade Fuko had spent in her coma. For delicacy's sake, he had refrained from asking Fuko or her sister. Until now he had figured it was simply a sensitive topic.

Kouko had filled him in on a few points, but this was the first time he had even heard Fuko mention that part of her life.

"I did dream, you know. In it, I went to high school and did something really important." She thought silently for a moment. *"I can't remember what exactly it was, but I know it was really important."*

"By high school, do you mean the one that my friends and I went to?"

Kouko would have continued teaching at that school if Fuko had never been in her accident, meaning that Fuko would have entered the same school when Tomoya and his classmates did.

"That's the one. I have no memory of whatever it was I was trying to do, but I remember people being very nice to me. There were lots of really nice people there."

Was she referring to Tomoya and his friends? Tomoya contemplated what Fuko's words meant, ignoring that she had deemed it all a dream.

Tomoya had hardly seen any of his friends since graduation. The faces of Youhei Sunohara, the Fujibayashi twins, Kotomi Kichinose, Tomoya Sakagami, Yukine Miyazawa, their teacher Toshio Koumura, and even of the dorm head Misako Sagara drifted to the surface of his mind as clearly as the last day of school.

He had almost forgotten how officious most of his friends had been at the time, aside from the lazy Sunohara.

"There were plenty of oddballs there too. It was almost scary. There were two people especially who kept picking on me whenever they saw me."

"That was mean of them."

"They were the worst!" Fuko studied Tomoya briefly, then continued. "Now that I think of it, I recall that one of them really closely resembled you, Okazaki-san."

"Don't even go there."

"Thanks to all the other nice people there, I was really happy at that school, even with that mean guy who resembled you there. And I got to accomplish something really important! Anyway, that's how my dream went."

"Well, I'm happy for you," Tomoya mumbled absent-mindedly.

A sudden thought had occurred to him. Why was it that Kouko decided to have her wedding at the school? Tomoya originally had assumed that it was simply because of the number of people they invited through her connections there.

But perhaps Fuko's story had something to do with that after all.

No, that was impossible. Tomoya shook his head and dismissed the idea.

And yet the thought returned to him. If there actually were some kind of connection between her dream and reality, it could mean something absolutely incredible was afoot.

"So now when I think of my dream, I'm reminded of what my sister told me. It got me wondering, what if what I saw in my dream is the other world after all? With all the nice people at the school, it makes sense to me...even considering the scary guy who looked like you, Okazaki-san."

"Feel free to stop bringing that part up."

"It takes a while to thin out and reduce all the suffering that comes from an accident like the one I had. And that's with all the other people's incoming pain besides mine."

"Makes sense."

He knew of that pain all too well, what with how he and Nagisa's parents fared after Nagisa died.

"Eventually, though, all pain does fade away. So now that I'm awake, I want to live my life the way that the people in the sunny world do."

"I see. But you've got one thing wrong—you already do live that way," Tomoya assured her. *"The one who needs to change and be more like that is me, not you."*

Aside from the teacup incident, they passed the rest of that autumn afternoon in peace.

The apartment which Tomoya and Ushio occupied was far from spacious; despite this, there was more than enough room in the home to fit both tenants. They required no more rooms; they slept in the same room, in adjacent beds. It was all they needed.

When sunlight through the window hit one's cheek, the person might almost hallucinate that the entire world was confined to this room, as if nothing existed beyond its walls.

"For all we know, this world might actually work the same way that your "sunny" world does," Tomoya offered.

"Right," Fuko nodded. Her movement brought her cheek in contact with a sunbeam, prompting a wide yawn.

"What, now you're sleepy too?"

Perhaps the conversation had tired her out. Fuko's eyelids drooped.

"Oh no, could you be one of those freaks that would do something unsavory to me in my sleep—"

"Like hell, of course not. And do you even know what 'unsavory' means?"

"Of course I do. I'm a grown woman. Knowing you, I'm sure you'd draw on my face or something while I slept."

"I might as well take that as an invitation."

Tomoya ended the sentence with a yawn of his own.

"Oh great, you've gone and passed it on to me."

Tomoya wiped his eyes dry with his right hand and smiled.

"Peaceful days like sure do feel nice. It sure would be nice if things could this way."

Tomoya was fully aware that this tranquil moment would not, could not, carry on forever. He mustered enough optimism to hope for it to happen nonetheless.

He wished that he and Ushio might never lose the modest life they had together.

"Yeah."
Fuko nodded again in agreement. In spite of the long time she had spent suffering from whatever caused her coma—

or rather, precisely because of that—she had to feel the same way.

Ushio turned over in her sleep. Fuko's lap was still acting as the pillow, so careless movement on the young woman's part would drop Ushio's head to the floor. She was already halfway there.

She had remained sound asleep during Fuko and Tomoya's entire conversation. People had told Tomoya that children who sleep well grow up quickly. Perhaps they were right. His heart lifted to see that the pain in her finger seemed to have disappeared.

"Oh, no! Ushio-chan's going to wake up!"

Fuko panicked for an instant, then carefully replaced Ushio's head over her lap. "This is your fault for being so loud, Okazaki-san."

"Somehow I doubt that."

Ushio's slow, slumberous breathing resumed as if she had never moved at all. Fuko combed the child's hair with her fingers, regarding her with a gentle expression.

Tomoya considered Fuko for a moment. She was an odd one for sure, he thought. The decade she had spent comatose made her story not unlike that of Sleeping Beauty; there was something almost otherworldly about her personality.

The word "childlike" was one way to describe her, yet it somehow missed the mark. Rather, her behavior more closely resembled the ramblings of a toddler.

"Babies can see a whole world apart from our own, one that adults can't see," Sanae had once told Tomoya. He wondered about that, thinking back to the time that Ushio was still in diapers. He wondered if that could have been true of Ushio.

He could still remember Ushio's fits of infantile giggling at nothing, and his own curiosity as to what in the world could have caught her attention. At the time he figured that she was merely seeing phantoms of her absent mother, and still imagined that to have been the case until this point.

But could it be that Fuko was still able to see what Sanae said should be invisible to herself and Tomoya?

Perhaps the long story Fuko had just told Tomoya was more believable than he originally thought. Fuko might be living near the border between reality and that sunny world of which she spoke.

"Hushabye, hushabye! Sleep, my baby. Time for my good little baby to sleep."

Where had Tomoya heard that song before?

Tomoya's mother had died before he could understand much of his surroundings. Raised only by his father, he had little memory of spending any such time with her. As a result he doubted that he would ever be able to pass on the experience to Ushio.

Tomoya constantly told stories of Nagisa to their daughter. How scatterbrained she could be, how easily she could panic or become nervous, how incredibly hard-working she had always been. Ushio never saw her mother except in pictures, but Tomoya made sure that she would always be familiar to Ushio.

Yet Ushio, like him, would never experience the care and love of Nagisa herself.

True, her grandmother Sanae would always coddle her as she did best at the Furukawas' house. Kyou, at the kindergarten, could almost play the part of a surrogate mother on days when Ushio went to day care. Together they were sufficient mother figures for the purpose of nurturing Ushio.

Tomoya was well aware, however, of the jealous hue that would flash in Ushio's eyes when the mothers of the other children would come to pick them up in the afternoon.



"Hey, Fuko. Do you know the rest of that lullaby?"

"I can."

Fuko gave her two-word answer with a quick nod.

"Wait, really?"

"Yes, I can sing the whole song."

Fuko answered him slowly, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Oh. Huh. Okay."

Tomoya halted for a moment, caught off-guard by the brevity of Fuko's response.

Ordinarily he would have expected some kind of outlandish reaction to his random question, hence his astonishment at the simple answer she gave.

"It's very rude of you to ask me that with such a tone," she chided him. Then she changed tack. *"Would you like me to sing it to her?"*

"If you would."

Even Tomoya's mannerisms softened in the face of Fuko's sudden considerate demeanor.

In reality, given that a lullaby is intended to put children to sleep, singing one to a child who has already dozed off is obviously pointless.

What Tomoya did recall of this was simply a part of the "dream" of the childhood he once had.

A scene which he longed for, yet could never experience.

A child resting on a mother's lap.

A mother singing her child to sleep.

Tomoya knew nothing of this. He had no experience of his own to teach him what to do; he remained unequipped to do the same for Ushio.

Even after fathering his own child, he had never witnessed this before this moment.

"Hushabye, hushabye! Sleep, my baby. Time for my good little baby to sleep. Where has my little girl's nanny gone?"

Fuko's singing voice stumbled through the melody, word by clumsy word.

The weather was relatively cool, with autumn now winding down to give way to winter, yet the room felt as temperate and warm as the outside air had been mere weeks prior.

Fuko's song had filled the room with the cozy feeling usually felt only in the light of the sunbeams through the windows. Tomoya relaxed and allowed Fuko to continue crooning over his sleeping daughter.

"Gone to expel the ogres from Onigashima—"

"No, that's from the story of Momotarou!"

Tomoya snapped at the singing girl, loud enough to finally rouse Ushio from her slumber.

♦



Sunny Paradise

Kashida Leo

"I'm going to visit Ushio-chan!"

"Wait a minute! I'm going to come with you this time!"

Kouko called out to her sister just before she flew through the door.

"Is something wrong, Onee-chan?" Fuko asked, eyeing the now-visible bulge in the elder's belly with concern.

"Oh, everything's fine. The baby wants to meet Ushio-chan too, that's all."

The snow had all melted following the passing of winter, leaving no need to worry that Kouko might slip on the way to the Okazakis' apartment.

Now that Kouko had made it past the high-risk period, the doctors were advising her that taking occasional walks would be best for her and the baby's health.

It had almost been a year since Fuko's return to consciousness.

With spring's approach the wind had grown noticeably warmer, allowing one to comfortably walk outside with one less layer of clothing.

Fuko restlessly circled Kouko along the way, assuming the role of an overprotective mother bear.

"Fuu-chan, it's hard to walk at a normal pace with you hovering around that close to me."

"But I'm your bodyguard, Onee-chan! I mean, a bodyguard in name, but really more like your knight!"

"Sure, but you can still do your job just as well if you walk beside me. I'll be fine with just that, I promise."

"Understood. Then I'll be the prince that acts as your escort instead."

Fuko obediently agree, taking her sister's hand and proceeding down the sidewalk by her side.

Halfway through the trip, Fuko suddenly halted and stared at something in front of them.

"Fuu-chan..."

Kouko stopped slightly ahead and turned back to see Fuko's sorrowful eyes briefly point in the elder's direction before returning to the building before them.

A lonely ancient-looking apartment building loomed ahead.

A widower and his daughter had once occupied a room there. A father with a loud, blunt demeanor and an unassailably adorable little girl.

The time Fuko had spent with them was no more than a few months, but that was plenty of time for her to come to love them both.

Yet now, they were gone.

"Come on. Fuu-chan. Let's move on to Sanae-san's house, okay?"

It was there that Ushio Okazaki waited for them. Or rather, that the silent mortuary tablet that remained of her waited.

Ushio had passed away at the end of winter, on the last day of heavy snow.

Fuko had only recently regained her livelihood following her long convalescence. Unlike Fuko, however, Ushio would never again open her eyes from the sleep that came to her that day.

Tomoya had gone missing not long after the funeral. He had not contacted his father's home, nor that of the Furukawas when he disappeared. Not even his former coworker, Kouko's husband Yuusuke, had any idea of his whereabouts.

"It's spring now," Fuko muttered. *"Just the right season to sleep in."*

Kouko nodded. *"I know what you mean. Everybody feels like sleeping all the time when winter ends."*

"I wanted to sing lullabies to Ushio-chan one more time. With her head on my lap."

"Fuu-chan..."

Bright spots were visible on the ground where the sun shone through the gaps in the springtime clouds that obscured it.

Standing in those sunbeams, one could feel the warmth in them.

There are days when it rains. There are days of wind, snow, and everything else. Life teaches people to understand this and to take it in stride.

They live for these moments in spite of those days.

The world around them and the sunny world Fuko so loved meet in those sunbeams; they are one and the same, a small isolated space of comfort to any who stand in their light.

Fuko turned her face skyward to peer into the expanse above.

"I'll bet Ushio-chan's sleeping on her mom's lap now instead. Maybe that noisy dad of hers is there too. All getting along somewhere in a paradise just like this world, with all its ups and downs, but cozy like a sunbeam. But if anything bad were to happen to them there, too..."

The wind picked up and blew past the two sisters. It rushed through the street where they stood, through the town where everyone they knew lived, out into the countryside.

Undoubtedly it would make its way to wherever Ushio and her parents were now. Spring was bound to arrive in their world sooner or later.

"Pain, pain, fly to me."

-end-



Year Seventeen

author
Masayuki Ogura
illustrator
Yuhazu

"I'm just so worried. My heart feels heavy whenever I start to think about it," Nagisa confessed beside me.

The riverside around us shone with the orange glow of the soon-to-set sun as the veil of night slowly encroached upon the sky from the east.

Nagisa and I reclined beside the trunk of a fallen tree near the riverbank. We had sat side-by-side in such a scene before, once upon a time.

"What's on your mind?"

"Shio-chan," she answered in a short murmur.

I was clad in my clothes from work at the electrician's office. Nagisa contrasted my appearance with her school uniform; the same one she wore when we met for the first time. Back when we did this in the past, we were both dressed the same way. At the time, she had chosen those loose-fitting clothes to cover her growing belly comfortably.

This wasn't the case now, so there was no way this could be real. I was dreaming.

The sense of security I felt despite my awareness of this was strange, but any sort of comfort was enough for me. It was hard not to feel confident with Nagisa by my side, leaning on me, after all.

I glanced down between our outstretched legs to see a single word carved into the bark of the fallen trunk.

"Ushio..."

Yet another aspect of this moment that matched the first time we had done this. This was the name that we chose together, the name our little girl would bear.

"Ushio will never be able to see me standing by her side in her lifetime. I may be able to watch her live and grow, but my voice can never reach her. So...that's what has me so concerned."

As much as I would have liked to do something about it, there was nothing anyone could do to fix that. Judging by her pensive thousand-yard stare, Nagisa must have been contemplating this for a long time.

"No need to worry about Ushio. She's fine. She's growing up happy and healthy, I promise."

Nagisa's face didn't brighten at all at my words of reassurance. She had likely already come to the conclusion that there was really no way to assuage her fears. However...

"Ushio has the same problem, you know."



"Huh?"

Nagisa turned to face me in surprise. I proceeded to elaborate slowly, in an admittedly patronizing tone.

"No doubt there are things Ushio wants to tell you more than anything else, on more topics than I could count. But however she goes about trying to do it—at your grave or otherwise—she can never know if she's getting through. You know?"

This had been on my mind for the same reason.

"Ohhhh."

Nagisa fell silent, contemplating this.

"But there's no need for concern. Ushio can handle herself. Whatever problems she faces, I'll be there to help her through them."

I said these words with utmost sincerity. That was the promise I made to myself and to Ushio when I finally decided to live on with her.

"But Tomoya-kun, what if—"

"Don't make that sad face at me, Nagisa."

She falls silent as I softly place my hand on her head.

I developed the habit of doing that to her after the first time, years before, when I discovered that it never failed to calm her down.

"Ushio has me, and I have her. We'll always be by each other's side. We'll be fine, I swear it."

"...Then that should be fine," Nagisa mumbled, visibly more relaxed. I countered with my own complaint.

"On my end, though, I'm more worried about you. You're the one who's been torn away from her."

"Oh, that's nothing to worry about anymore," my wife responded calmly.

The expression on her face closely resembled the one she wore in the last moment we shared, after Ushio's birth.

It was decidedly a smile, carrying with it an aura of weary pride mixed with her determination not to let her anxiety affect me.

"I can deal with it. You're the one who gave me the courage to pull it off, Tomoya-kun."

"You little scamp," I joked, gently pulling her close by the shoulder.

Nagisa wordlessly answered by pressing her cheek against my collar.

I'm reminded of the fact that none of this is real. I find myself happy with this feeling nonetheless. If only this moment could last forever...

As if in response to this thought, a bright light flared up and turned my vision white.

To state the obvious, this light was in fact the piercing blaze of the morning sun on my face. Somebody had thrown my bedroom window's curtains open.

"Good morning, Dad!" came the voice of the culprit.

Her figure and silhouette were so reminiscent of Nagisa's, but with a few key differences. Of these, the easiest to spot was the long hair, extending far past her shoulders and reaching her waist.

A second glance would reveal a certain strength of will, an aura indicating none of the fragility her mother had, but instead only Nagisa's kindness, coupled with a dignified look in her eyes.

"G'morning, Ushio."

I still remembered what life was like when she was still in Nagisa's belly. Yet here she was before me, so much more grown up than I could have imagined.

"Sorry, was that too bright?"

"Nah, you're good."

I squinted and blinked as I answered.

The sensation of Nagisa's cheek against me lingered in my shoulder. My body still refused to admit that she was no longer there.

"Of course it was all just a dream."

"What was?"

Ushio tilted her head quizzically. I wondered how much earlier she had woken up. She had already changed out of her pajamas into her school uniform.

"Oh, nothing."

I stood up and briefly took in the view through the window. The skies were mostly clear, with not a rain cloud in sight.

"Looks like we're in for some nice weather today."

"I bet!"

We both nod at each other.

■ ■ ■

At had been just barely over ten years since Ushio and I had started living together again.

A lot had happened between us over the course of that decade; more than I could possibly retell in one sitting. We lived through happy and sad moments in equal measure, though recently our days had passed by in relative peace. Not that life was dull at home, of course—we both led busy enough lives, but pleasantly so, for lack of a better word.

We still lived in the same apartment where Ushio was born.

I had considered moving elsewhere multiple times, but for some reason we would drop the idea and let it fizzle from our minds each time the topic came up.

Ushio may have just been the type to prefer to come home to the same place where she had grown up year after year. Fitting, for a girl whose name means "tides."

To be honest, I couldn't deny that I found it hard to part with this place, where so many of my dearest memories resided.

Ushio spoke up from across the low table.

"Oh, Dad?"

At some point she had dropped the habit of calling me "papa," a fact which saddened me to realize, as silly as it might be to expect her to do so forever.

"School ends at one o'clock for me today."

Ushio sat plainly at the table holding a cup of tea in her hands, having already cleaned her plate of the breakfast I had made.



"Oh, today's the last day of midterm week, isn't it?" I asked, peering over my newspaper before taking a brief sip from my own teacup.

"That's right. And my club's on break this week, too. So let me handle dinner tonight!"

"Sure, the kitchen's all yours. Looking forward to it."

I thought for a moment, realizing that Ushio had been coming home from school somewhat earlier than usual in recent weeks. I spent my high school days in the go-home club, so to speak, so I had thought nothing of it until this point. That wasn't exactly true, actually—I did spend a fair bit of time with Nagisa in her drama club, though it clearly wasn't a memory that stayed at the front of my mind.

"It won't be long before the rainy season lets up, and then we'll just be a few steps away from summer break!"

"Yup."

Ushio squinted and glared in response to my noncommittal one-word response with a squinting glare. She had enjoyed far fewer chances to enjoy her time off over summer breaks than she did during the school year, and it likewise proved to be a busy season for me each year. This made enjoying summer together a challenge.

"Hold on, Dad. Are you implying that you actually aren't happy about summer?"

My face probably gave it away. Ushio tilted her head, long hair smoothly swaying behind her shoulder.

"Not particularly, I guess. I mean, do you like it when I'm soaked and reeking of sweat?"

Ushio cracked a mischievous grin at my answer.

"But in summer, you can look forward to seeing me in a swimsuit! Right, Dad?"

"Oh, now there's a thought..."

I played the creep, though I was already well beyond the age for thoughts of a teenager in a bathing suit to occupy my mind. Ushio noticed this and, still smiling, continued.

"If you like the idea that much, I'll be happy to let you choose mine for me. I'll wear whatever you like, even a super risqué one."

"Ohoho! Well, if you're offering...wait, this is taking the joke too far!"

That crossed the line rather quickly. I wasn't inclined to joke about that.

Father's bias notwithstanding, I couldn't deny that Ushio had grown tall and shapely; more so than her mother was at the same age. Perhaps it was due to my genes, or just as likely some aspect of her grandmother Sanae-san that had lain dormant in Nagisa. Whatever the cause, I was proud of the result.

Ushio's striking appearance began to surface once she entered junior high though at the time she paid it no heed and went about her day as if nothing about her were different. I was forced to rearrange the apartment to give her a private place to change clothes (though she would never bother to seek privacy if she were running late; old habits die hard, it would seem). Naturally, this meant that any suggestive outfits or swimsuits would make it hard to figure out where to look...I really should drop the topic now.

"Did I make you imagine it?"

Ushio's grin widened upon realizing that she'd found a chink in my armor.

"Yep, you got me."

Ushio made a slight double-take in surprise. My honesty was clearly unexpected.

"Oh, I thought you were messing with me."

"You really did, though. I don't like about things like that. That said, I'd really prefer that you avoid talking that way about yourself."

"Yeah, point taken. I'm sorry."

An immediate apology. Definitely a tendency inherited from her mother, I thought.

"Well, time to go. Wish me luck!" Ushio chimed as she stood stretched with her shoes in one hand. With her other hand, she patted and straightened her skirt—a motion that appeared to be rather popular with girls her age.

"See you later, Dad!"

"Be safe out there."

"Okay!"

Ushio slung her bag over her shoulder and stepped toward the door—only to stop in her tracks as if she had forgotten something.

"...Goodbye."

The second farewell was not meant for me. Ushio's eyes were pointed in the direction of the lone picture frame standing on the chest of drawers near the door.

Featured in the photograph was an image of Nagisa, taken long before she left us. Ushio had not even been conceived yet at the time, and though Ushio never knew her mother personally, it was she who saw the picture, recognized who Nagisa was to her, and requested that I frame the picture to put there when we finally decided to live together.

My cheeks relaxed.

Can you see now, Nagisa?

I told you she'd grown up to be a strong girl, didn't I?

I silently reassured Nagisa while her face in the picture beamed back at me, as she always had.

That afternoon, I was at the office.

"Oh, I see. Well, I suppose there's no denying how much your little girl's grown now, is there?"

So Yoshino-san replied with a deeply moved expression when I related the events of the morning.

Yoshino-san was by all definitions my senpai—first giving me the chance to get this job to begin with, and then continuing to mentor me and work as my partner once my job began in earnest. Furthermore—as I would learn some time after this all began—he was in fact a graduate of the same school which Nagisa and I attended, from several years before us.

In terms of skill as an electrician he was a definite veteran; I heard at one point that his former boss had considered allowing him to become an independent contractor with the company, though Yoshino-san himself elected to stay.

"She's already seventeen. Can you believe it?"

I mirrored my senior's sentiment with the same heavy-hearted tone with which he had spoken. The five years after her birth were effectively devoid of shared memories between us, but we had already overshadowed that with more than a decade of living together. I could hardly help feeling emotional when I recalled those years.

"By the way, she's going to the same school you and I used to go to, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is. I'm told that pretty much every class in the school is more advanced than when we were there. Education's really improved since our time," I mused.

"Really, now? With how fondly I remember my time there, I didn't expect the place to improve much more...embarrassing as it is to admit it."

I felt exactly the same way.

"Actually, Yoshino-san, do you know which club she's in now?"

He tilted his head. *"Huh. You know, I don't think I've even asked. Which one?"*

I assumed an ironically proud pose as I answered,

"The drama club. Seriously."

Yoshino-san's eyes grew wide. *"You don't say."*

"Someone told me that the club had been disbanded once Nagisa-san graduated, but to think your girl would revive it herself."

"Ushio started it back up when she first had the chance to join a club, and since then it's grown to be on part with all the other clubs there, apparently. Surprised?"

"Sure am."

Yoshino-san answered honestly, nodding his head. I deliberately put on a proud tone to show off to him, though I was admittedly just as shocked when Ushio first gave me the news—she had waited almost an entire year after the fact to reveal it to me.

I was fairly certain that Ushio joined the club fully aware of its history and Nagisa's involvement with it; however, she seemed to be rather unhappy about it for some reason. She spent a long time brooding, unable to discuss the issue with me, until at one point she found an opportune time to finally tell me shortly before this day.

When Ushio finally gathered the courage to tell me the truth, she appeared both relieved and genuinely nervous—terrified and sweaty, even. Strange as it may seem, I actually found it rather heartwarming to see that in all these years, my daughter had yet to outgrow her tendency to tread extra-carefully with everything.

"So when's the club's next performance, Okazaki?"

"Uh, the semester's about to end, so halfway through July, I think. Pretty sure they said attendance isn't limited to students this time, either."

"Oh, really? Then I'd like to go see it myself."

"Feel like going along with me, then?"

"Hmm, let me think...you know, why don't we have everyone go together?"

Suddenly Yoshino-san was even more excited to attend than I was.

"Everyone? Yeah, that sounds nice."

"Doesn't it?"

Yoshino-san was visibly delighted about the prospect, beaming with a wide grin that took ten years off of his face.

"But putting on a play and everything involved takes a lot of physical effort, doesn't it?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"When I was at school, the club would rehearse lines and stage setup every morning. I don't think that would be any different these days, would it?"

"Oh...that's a good point."

When Nagisa and I ran the drama club, we only ever produced one play, and that one hardly had any technically or physically demanding content to speak of. In reality, though, that would never fly in a typical theater club. Thinking back, I realized that Ushio had been doing cardio workouts and stretching often at home.

It had taken a mention from Yoshino-san for me to finally put two and two together and associate that with the club.

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Masayuki Ogura

"I'm kind of late in saying this, but it's good to see she's grown to be so healthy."

"Yeah..." I muttered.

I was ashamed to have failed to notice for so long.

"Don't feel bad, Okazaki. I think it's enough that you've raised a daughter as active as her. If you hadn't, I doubt we'd still be working together, you know?"

"Yoshino-san..."

His words brought a variety of memories swimming back to the surface.

Ushio fell extremely ill once, more than ten years before. She suffered a blazing fever that showed no signs of receding, in a manner identical to the mysterious condition that inexorably haunted Nagisa. Not knowing what else I could do, I resigned from my job and devoted my time to caring for Ushio. She showed no signs of improvement. With desperation clouding my judgment, I carried her outside into the blinding snow to seek help, but only wandered aimlessly in the cold.

That was when something strange happened.

I came to understand much of this after the fact. Evidently I myself was in an exhausted delirium of sorts, and thus my memory remained somewhat muddled. Ushio herself also claimed to remember nothing from that day.

Thus, neither of us have any idea of what exactly transpired. Ushio and I liked to believe that fate itself had something to do with it.

First, I heard someone speak to me.

"Papa."

Despite the obvious source of the word, it took a moment for me to realize that the voice was coming from the girl in my arms. She spoke with clarity unlike the feverish mumbling of an afflicted little girl. I put my hand on her forehead to discover that it felt no hotter than my hand. Somehow, Ushio's fever had been dispelled.

There, in the middle of the road, I pulled Ushio to my chest and cried audibly with no regard for who might see us. I would remember that moment more clearly than anything else that had happened that day.

I would never know for certain what had lifted Ushio's fever—or even if anything had in fact done so—but the fact remained that my daughter's life had been spared.

Though it may make little sense to think of it this way, I felt in my heart that Nagisa must have saved Ushio—and in doing so, saved me as well.

The days immediately following this were something of a challenge.

First, I gave the fullest account of what happened that I could to my high-school friend, and a teacher at Ushio's kindergarten, Kyou. Furious, she told me to visit the hospital immediately. There, I met her twin sister Ryou, who similarly expressed rage at my failure to address Ushio's illness for so long (and subsequently broke down into tears). Every person I would encounter until the hospital staff had cleared Ushio (and myself) to leave expressed varying levels of anger at my negligence, though each of them did so in a warm, decidedly relieved tone. Their admonishment convinced me to stop attempting to face problems relying solely on my own strength.

Since then, of all the people in my life, not one would decline to listen to my troubles and offer help, regardless of how busy they were. For this, I would remain forever grateful to each of them.

After that episode, I would get extremely upset if Ushio contracted so much as a mild cold. However, a fever on the level of the one that laid her low that one time would never afflict her again. Instead, her growth accelerated almost explosively over the next few years.

As for me, with the crisis passed and my mind back to its healthy state, I returned to work at my old job. Given the circumstances of my departure, I expected to have a hard time convincing my boss to give me the position and pay I had once held, but instead I found that he had slyly recorded my notice of resignation as a request for extended leave.

And speaking of returning to work...

"Hey, Yoshino-san?"

"Mm?"

When I handed in my resignation, Yoshino-san had switched his position to that of a driver so that I could come back to work without any delays. In fact, this status had remained the case ever since my return, up until the present conversation. I intended to relinquish my role to him, but in searching for the right time to do so I put it off repeatedly.

"What's the matter, Okazaki? You're making a gloomy face."

"I, uh. Actually, never mind."

"...Well, okay. That works for me."

I wondered if perhaps Yoshino-san realized that my mind had wandered to my memories of the time Ushio spent bedridden. I found myself glad that Yoshino-san always left the topic alone. It was quite like him to be so considerate. Our conversation trailed off, incomplete, as we moved on from pondering Ushio's club activities and how picturesque she and I were as a pair.

"Shall we get going?"

"Let's go!"

We went over our equipment checklist and began our usual day spent climbing telephone poles. Our company's employees were all contracted to service the power lines across the city. The same company was responsible for the construction of the power grid and street lights during the town's development, but with construction largely complete across the board, much of our work involved replacing burned-out lamps and repairing old transformers. In short, our job was to fix bits and pieces of our city.

I originally took this job for the sake of protecting and providing for Nagisa. Somewhere along the line, I started to see it as less of a nine-to-five and more of a calling. I was doing more than fiddling with wires; I was "healing" our town one neighborhood at a time. The reason for this change in my outlook was a complete mystery to me.

This time we had been dispatched to install both the cables and connection points for high-speed internet lines. As the materials we would use required much more finesse to install than what we had always handled, we needed to take extra care to make sure we were ready.

"Well, at least these are much lighter than the copper wires."

"That's because fiber optics are basically glass. The problem isn't the weight; it's how delicate they are."

We both had plenty of experience working with wires, which thankfully meant that there was no confusion as to how to install the wires. Regardless, the level of precision needed for it greatly extended the time necessary to get the job done.

"...And with that, we're done. That's the last screw."

"Same here. I'll close everything up—Okazaki, you go ahead and start the ping test."

"Got it."

We carried a special device specifically designed to test wires for their ability to carry a signal. For these newer ones, their sensitivity to change was high, leaving much less room for error than their copper counterparts. The test itself needed to be performed with a similar level of precision, though it still required one to climb the pole to do so. The task would be so much easier if I could do it on the ground, but just about everything about this job required some kind of physical skill. I was used to it.

"Well?" Yoshino-san called.

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I waited for the machine to finish. *"All green. We're good."* I wiped the sweat from my brow with my cotton-gloved hand and let Yoshino-san confirm my results.

"Good. I'll go seal the cover now."

"By all means."

We simultaneously breathed a heavy sigh, another extra-long job finally done. A young, feminine voice rang out from below us, startling me.

"Working hard, gentlemen?"

There were only men working in our office, hence my surprise—the voice couldn't have been coming from a coworker. We'd been hoping to find a new female hire for some time, but until now it had mainly been our boss, Yoshino-san, and myself running the show.

Of course, I knew immediately who the speaker was. I could never mistake that voice.

"I take it you've finished yours, Ushio?" I volleyed back

Indeed, the girl below us was none other than my daughter, on her way back from school.

"Good afternoon, Yoshino-san!"

My coworker gave a small tip of his helmet in lieu of a typical greeting.

"Are you gonna go shopping after this?" I asked.

Ushio answered with a bright grin, *"Yep! There's a huge monthly sale all afternoon, so that's where I'm headed. I've never actually been to see it yet so I'm excited to see what I can find." She let out a nigh-sinister chuckle. "I wonder what all the big deals are gonna be..."*

It was always a proud moment to see her so fiercely determined, especially when it also proved how dependable she was. I genuinely wondered whether she picked this trait up from me, or else inherited from her mother's side.

"On that note, what do you want for dinner tonight, Dad?" she continued, adjusting the bag in her hand, perched over her shoulder.

"Hmm, good question. I'll want something filling. How about a meaty stir-fry of some kind?"

"Lemme think...what do you think about ginger-fried pork? With caramelized onions?"

I relished the thought.

"Now there's an idea."

"That does sound nice."

Yoshino-san chimed in next to me.

"Now you've got my appetite working. I should make a request to Kouko along those lines later. I don't think I'd be giving her too much a burden with that.."

Ushio and I automatically shot a wry grin at each other as he spoke. What a loving husband he was, to still worry about troubling his wife too much over something as simple as dinner. We found it admittedly heartwarming.

"Well, I'm off. Good luck, you two!"

"And the same to you, at the sale!"

"No luck needed, I've got this!" she sang, proudly thumping her chest with her free hand. She staggered visibly with the sheer force of the hit, though I pretended not to notice.

"Hmm..."

"I kind of had this impression the last time I saw her, but now it's clear as day that while she may look a lot like her mother, she gets her personality from you."

"You're not the first to tell me that."

My wry grin from a moment before returned. I had read somewhere before that it's common for a growing girl to mimic her father, though admittedly in our single-parent household there was really no other person at home to influence her personality.

That said, everyone else I knew seemed to more or less share Yoshino-san's opinion. Kyou, for example.

"She used to be so shy, I totally thought she was a dead ringer for Nagisa. But now I have to say, with the way she just quietly gives her peers little nudges of support and responds so curtly to others' gratitude is just like you. At her core, though, she's such a sweet and honest girl."

So she told me. Even Sunohara, the man I still can hardly believe I considered a friend, had something to say about Ushio.

"Man, it's like somebody copied your personality and put a Nagisa-shell around it! And that's twice as bad as if she looked like you too! With her pretty face masking the mini-version of you inside, that's, like, three times worse!"

I was hardly surprised to hear him mix up which number he meant to use mid-insult. At any rate, while I probably couldn't quite say that he was wrong, I also felt that Ushio had plenty of individuality all her own. For example, she was even more skilled than I at getting Sunohara's goat.

So much so that even Sunohara himself hated to talk about it.

"Hey, why would you subject me, of all people, to this? I'm serious, I want an actual answer this time! I want to be the one who's teasing Ushio-chan, not the other way around! Wait, Okazaki, I didn't mean anything dirty by that! Put down the wrench! It was a joke! I mean, just forget I said anything! Please, wait! No! Eeeek!"

It was never difficult to elicit funny noises or comments from him.

I turned to Yoshino-san. *"But in terms of housework she's worlds beyond me now. I was in charge of that when she was little, but now even her cooking repertoire is way up in the clouds compared to mine."*

"So she's got domestic talent too, does she?"

"Thankfully, yeah."

I knew it was something to be proud of. Much of the time I spent raising her, I secretly worried that as a lone father, I might not be able to teach Ushio the skills and manners expected of a girl in Japan. In all aspects, these doubts proved to be wrong. Ushio had turned out to be proud, capable, and clearly feminine.

"Well, that's good. I'm sure she'd make a wonderful wife in time," Yoshino-san mused nonchalantly.

"A w-wife?" I stuttered.

Of course I could hardly let that statement pass without retort.

"What's the matter, Okazaki? You look like you're about to go berserk with rage."

"I, uh, well..." I faltered.

I didn't mind the thought of her marrying someone. Nothing would make me happier than seeing Ushio in a wedding dress. But...the husband. Imagining a husband was the problem.

"What, do you hate the idea of seeing your daughter marry someone?"

"No, that's not it..." I paused.

Again, I pictured Ushio getting married. I was unfamiliar with this feeling of wanting to banish the though from my mind.

"Well, it's kind of a personal problem," I began to explain. "I mean, before talk of a husband comes the idea of having a b-boyfriend, right? There are steps to take, like getting to properly know each other first, then nurturing a healthy, pure relationship—"

And then there was the part where I get to toss whoever the loser latching onto her out the door. That's the way things should work, I thought to myself.

"Did you take those 'steps' when you were with Nagisa back in the day?"

"Say what?" I spluttered.

As he implied, it was true that Nagisa and I did things more or less out of order ourselves.

"No, but that's exactly why I have to make sure that as her father, I can at least protect her from all the things that would end in regret for her."

"Do you have any such regrets yourself?"

"What?" I stammered again.

Of course I had none. The words Nagisa said to me, assuring me that she would never regret anything she had done in her life, remained crystal clear in my memory. I still felt the same way.

"W-w-well, by regrets, I mean..."

I hesitated, compelled to respect Nagisa's memory with honesty. Yoshino-san gave me a reprieve before I could decide how to answer.

"Don't worry, I get it," he assured me with a knowing grin. *"I know what they say about fathers turning into different people where their daughters are concerned, and you just proved it."*

Ashamed of my transparency, I was at a loss to argue the point.

"Okazaki, as men we have to be magnanimous. One day your daughter will bring whoever she loves to meet you. When that happens, you have to accept that...that's one way to show love."

"So that counts as love too, does it?"

"That's love," in a variety of versions, was Yoshino-san's favorite phrase. A tingling sensation crawled down my spine every time he said it. Thinking back, the number of times I had told Nagisa that I loved her could be counted on one hand, as far as I could recall.

"So you mean I have to accept Ushio having a b-b-boyfriend?"

"Why are you so hung up on that specifically?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure, myself," I admitted. It seemed that I was so averse to the idea that it affected my brain's ability to form words.

"Anyway," I continued, *"would it be inappropriate to, say, give a test of sorts to the boyfriend in question?"*

In my case, I had to play baseball with Nagisa's father before he would truly accept me as a son-in-law. Specifically, I had to hit his fastball. I figured there was nothing wrong with doing something similar now that I was in his shoes.

"Hmm," Yoshino-san nodded in acknowledgment. *"I suppose something along those lines would probably be fine. What do you have in mind?"*

I shrugged. *"Something I'm pretty good at, naturally."*

"I see. Such as?"

"Let me think," I paused. *"A contest to see which of us can connect a power line fastest seems appropriate. What do you think?"*



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"Hey now..."

Yoshino-san let out an exasperated sigh.

"Going back to the original point, you really seem to be enjoying life with your daughter. Kouko and I really should get around to making one."

"You don't think you're a bit late to the game on that, old boy?"

"Watch it, kid—"

He cut his retort short, already mirroring my grin.

"...Dad?"

Ushio's voice came once again from below, this time carrying a hesitant vibe to it. Yoshino-san and I peered down to see her standing in the same place as before. On her face she wore a deeply troubled expression.

Beside her, tightly gripping her hand, stood a little girl of perhaps five or six years. I couldn't tell whether or not she was quite at the age to start elementary school yet. Her hair stretched down as far as Ushio's did, though she wore it in a pair of braids fluttering in the wind over her face, which was filled with worry to match Ushio'.

She remained silent as I eyed her. Instead, she simply stared straight back at me.

Everything about her reminded me of Ushio when she was that age.

To be clear, they were obviously far from identical. The aspect that the two girls shared was the impression they gave of general shyness and a powerful desire to avoid causing trouble for anyone.

"What's up, Ushio? And who's your little friend?" I called as I climbed down the pole. Yoshino-san mirrored my descent.

"I met her just a bit down the road. She's lost," Ushio explained succinctly.

Ushio appeared at a loss as to how to solve the problem. The unknown girl, meanwhile, kept her brow furrowed in an evident struggle to keep herself from crying.

That, too, was something that defined Ushio at that age: doing her best to never cry in public. Crying was only to be done in a bathroom, or in Daddy's arms. Of the many things Ushio was told in those years, this was one of the few that she truly took to heart, even now.

"We walked around the area a bit trying to find someone she knew, but we didn't find anyone..."

Yoshino-san and I automatically exchanged glances again.

We had seen plenty of people from this town in our line of work, but the little girl was a new face to both of us. She could have moved in with her family recently, or perhaps was visiting from a neighboring city. We had no idea.

"So her parents—"

"Are nowhere to be found, then," Yoshino-san finished my sentence.

Whoever her parents are, we thought, they must have noticed their missing daughter by now and are on high alert. Given that, we almost certainly would have noticed them in the area. When someone is frantically searching for their kid, it's quite obvious.

"Uh...well, hey."

Our new acquaintance's shoulders' trembling intensified when I addressed her. She was visibly terrified.

"Don't worry, it's okay! I know he may look scary but he's a good person, I promise!"

Ushio gave an honest—if eyebrow-raising—sentence of encouragement. It was effective enough to get the girl to look up from the asphalt to face me, though her expression remained decidedly nervous.

"Okay," I continued. *"So who are you looking for?"*

"Papa n' Mama..."

Well, that much was obvious, I thought to myself.

"What do they look like?"

"Papa's a strong man n' Mama's nice."

"Ah, I see. That gets us nowhere."

Ushio chimed in. *"You're not asking her the right way, Dad."*

She sounded angry, and a glance in her direction confirmed this. I thought I was decent at this since taking care of Ushio at that age had taught me well, but it seemed that I had lost my touch.

Ushio stooped to match the child's eye level and asked in the gentlest voice I'd ever heard her use, *"Can you tell us more about your Mama and Papa, sweetie?"*

If not for appearances, I could have mistaken them for sisters.

Aha, I thought. That was what I had forgotten—squatting to the child's level to avoid intimidating them was elementary. I had learned to do that much back when Ushio had such moments, though it was far too late for remembering it to matter.

The girl said nothing, simply staring at Ushio with the same level of distress evident in her countenance. Ushio likewise remained silent, maintaining her invariably mild gaze but also not changing the subject or goading the lost girl to speak. She simply waited.

"...Um."

Perhaps soothed by Ushio's demeanor, she finally opened up. We spent the next few moments going over the main aspects of her parents' appearance.

Ushio continued to keep her manner sincere as she asked questions and wrote notes. As resourceful and ready-for-anything as the image was, I figured that the notepad she was using was the same one she normally had for memorizing her lines as a member of the drama club.

"Okay, Dad. I've got the main points down, so listen up. First of all..."

She succinctly relayed the description which the girl had stuttered and struggled to say, with remarkable clarity.

"Got it. Yoshino-san?"

Before I could even ask him to do so, Yoshino-san had already pulled the cell phone from its pocket on his toolbelt and dialed a number.

"Hey, it's me. I need you to get everyone to help us find someone in the area. There's a young couple probably making the rounds looking for their daughter. Description is as follows..."

Yoshino-san didn't need to climb a telephone pole to be a fast worker.

I peered up at the pole he and I had just been working on. This might prove useful, I surmised.

"Welp, here goes!"

"Dad?"

Ushio called up to me in a tone of equal parts surprise and confusion, watching my sudden leap onto the pole. Beside her, the lost girl did the same.

Of course, I had no intention of going back to redo the work which Yoshino-san had already finished, nor was I of the vage to try looking cool in front of the two girls either.

This particular area was at a considerably higher elevation than the rest of town. Compounded with the added height of the telephone pole, I couldn't have asked for a better vantage point. In a sense, this was a lookout point reserved for workers such as myself and Yoshino-san. Or so I felt.

As usual, Yoshino-san had had instantly understood my intention without any explanation needed. He put a hand over his cell phone's mouthpiece and called up to me as I climbed.

"Okazaki, Johnny says he's seen someone who fits the description. They were north and a bit east of here, and just as desperate as we expected. Go as high as you can and take a look."

"Got it," I yelled back from halfway up the pole. *"North, and a bit to the east. I'll check once I get that far!"*

By now, Yoshino-san and I had been a team long enough to understand each other's thought processes as a matter of course. In a manner of speaking, it was a connection not too different from what Ushio and I shared.

I needed to climb beyond the point that Yoshino-san and I had perched to work on the wires, and so I left the tools attached to my legs hanging on the pegs near the transformer. This liberated my movement somewhat, and was something I did often when I needed to fix an uncommon problem with the wires or had to use equipment besides what I usually carried. Yoshino-san and I always made the rounds with such equipment already on hand, to be ready for anything.

I briefly scanned the town around me upon reaching the top rung of the pole. The field of vision granted by the height was superb, as I imagined. With no large buildings nearby, the strong wind on me was a pleasant sensation.

I had no time to spare for enjoying it, however. I immediately turned to face the direction Yoshino had relayed to me.

"Yoshino-san, I'm looking over there and I don't see anyone who looks like that!"

"Nobody?"

"I bet they went to look somewhere else! Check other areas, Dad!" Ushio promptly followed up with her hands cupped around her mouth.

"On it!"

I redoubled my efforts. The words of another, unfamiliar voice came next, to my surprise.

"D-do your best!"

The little girl was quiet, but I could still hear her clearly enough.

"Leave it to me, I've got this!" I shouted to her, injecting as much confidence and energy into my tone as possible to keep her in a more positive mood.

I had originally learned to do this from Ushio, of course—though I wondered if she still remembered when she had inadvertently taught me.

The thought wandered through my mind as I scanned the townscape. For the moment, there was no sign of the girl's parents.

I lacked the neck of an owl, and therefore needed to rotate my position on the pole to broaden my angle of view. Yet a half-turn around the pole later, I still had no results.

"If you can, Nagisa, I could use a sign..."

I found myself praying silently to my wife for aid. As soon as I realized what I had said, a gentle breeze swept over me, relaxing my tense arms. I automatically turned to face the direction from which the wind had come.

In the distance, I could see a lone hill—the very same one, in fact, where I had first met Nagisa. Walking up that street was my target.

"I found them!"

All three of the onlookers below turned their heads skyward to look at me.

"Ushio, it's the hill. You know, the one on the way to school. They're on this side of it!" I cry on my descent down the pole.

"Oh, that hill! Gotcha! Let's go!"

She set off in that direction. Her new friend gripped her hand and followed beside her for a ways before stopping abruptly and turning back.

"Um...thank you," she sheepishly muttered to us with a small, polite bow.

Yoshino-san and I replied with a wave and a smile.

"Okay, we're off. Thanks, Dad! Thanks, Yoshino-san!" Ushio added.

"No prob. Be careful," I bid them.

Ushio ran off as quickly as she could while the girl in tow could ran along gripping her hand. I previously described them as sisterly, but scratch that—with all due respect to my daughter, now she seemed far more motherly instead.

A wave of melancholy swept through me as I realized that Ushio and the girl were sharing a moment which Nagisa never did with Ushio.

The overall mixture of emotions was strange to me. New, certainly.

"Look at how much she's grown up. Until now, I always pictured her in my mind as if she was still as old as the little lady we just helped," Yoshino-san calmly commented as we watched the girls run into the distance.

"I have to admit I felt the same way. Anyway, goin' up—"

I reached over to the rungs on the pole and began climbing back up.

"Okazaki?" Yoshino asked, puzzled.

"I'm going to watch how it goes from up here."

Part of me also wanted to see the townscape from that height again, honestly, but it was mostly simple anxiety about their chance of success that drove me up the pole.

I peered at the hill again as I reached the top. The figures of the people who seemed to be the girl's parents were facing the top of the hill, but slowly descent, evidently having wondered if their daughter might have wandered onto the school grounds.

There, Ushio and her tagalong finally arrived to meet them. It appeared that my assumption was correct—the latter immediately let go of Ushio's hand and bolted toward the adults, jumping into her father's arms.

I imagined that she was in tears at this point. Children don't stay quiet when they run to daddy and hold him that tightly, for that long.

Ushio bowed her head politely while the parents rejoiced and embraced their daughter; the mother noticed this and, though late, returned the gesture.

Ushio, meanwhile, appeared somewhat flustered—for lack of a better word—to receive any thanks at all. She seemed to be more focused on the little girl, still crying in her father's arms, than on either of the parents. Most likely, Ushio could see much of herself in the girl. That was what I figured, at least.

The younger girl pulled her face away from her father's shirt after a moment to say something to Ushio herself. The elder's head bobbed in acknowledgement and a response with a few words of her own. Probably exchanging the standard "thank you" lines, I figured.

"Welp, down we go..." I muttered, clambering down the pole for the second time.

"How did it go?" Yoshino asked once I was back on the asphalt.

"Went pretty well, looked like," I replied coolly while I undid my harness and removed the lifeline pulley from the pole.

"Well, I'm glad it worked out, then," he followed up, nodding and looking pleased, as if he were speaking about something he had done himself.

"That little girl looked like she was really trying hard not to cry. She must have been distraught from looking for her parents by the time Ushio found her. Kids that age have so much to deal with, and so little experience doing it."

"Tell me about it."

I gave a slow nod of agreement. The memory of Ushio's own emotional struggles at that age was still fresh in my mind, more than a decade later.

"I bet her nerves were practically shot until she and Ushio managed to find her parents."

"...Yeah, probably."

The image of the poor girl bawling into her father's shoulder flashed through my mind again. The thing I remembered most clearly from the first time Ushio did the same to me at five years old was the raw emotion we both felt. Perhaps, I thought, if Ushio still remembered that moment herself, she may feel the same way about that memory.

The next thing I vividly remembered was the scenery. That meadow, overrun with flowers. The image of the place where I finally resolved to face myself and be the father that Ushio needed.

Ten years after the fact, I still felt the same degree of relief and satisfaction I had when our life together began, knowing that things had turned out just fine.

Of this, I was certain.

"Okay, ready to move on to the next one?"

"Oh, right. Sure, let's—hmm?"

From a distance, I detected the sound of footsteps, rapid and furious.

Curious, I turned to see who it could be, only to find Ushio sprinting with all her might.

"W-what's the rush, Ushio?" I shouted in surprise.

"I can still barely make the sale if I run!" She exclaimed, not slowing down even slightly as she blazed past.

"I don't mind if you buy the packaged stuff!" I shouted back at her. At that speed, her skirt was fluttering in a way that ordinarily would have warranted an objection from me, but Ushio was obviously in no mood to pay it any heed.

The sound of her shoes on the pavement deepened in pitch with a barely perceptible Doppler effect as she vanished from sight. Yoshino-san heaved an amused sigh.

"How should I put this...you've got one hell of a daughter, my friend."

I mirrored the sigh, masking my mild embarrassment. "Yeah. Maybe because she's the only girl in the house. I don't know."

This was no rom-com, of course, and I inwardly wished that she would act more ladylike. I had no more need of panty humor in my life.

Later in the evening, I walked home from work through a town imbued with the same orange hue as the sky in my dream from that morning.

Thoughts of my search for the lost girl's parents occupied my mind as I walked, primarily of the warm wind that passed over me when I prayed to Nagisa. If that was indeed the work of Nagisa somehow...perhaps she was actually watching over us from somewhere after all.

Unable to escape the idea, I picked up the pace for the remainder of the way to our apartment.

"I'm back."

"Oh, welcome home!"

Ushio was waiting, sporting the simple T-shirt and spats she typically wore around the house—yet somehow, her tone seemed less energetic than usual.

I glanced at the kitchen to see a frying pan and pot on the stove, steam still rising from both. The rest of the area seemed cluttered, and Ushio herself seemed to be a tired mess. This meant that...

"I see you managed to make it to the sale in time."

"Yeah, somehow..."

She sat at the dining table with her upper body laid flat on its surface.

I could hardly blame her. After walking around the streets with the little girl and that mad dash to reach the store in time, anyone would be exhausted.

"All pooped out, are we?"

"Yeah, but I made it...jeez, what a free-for-all, though!"

Through her fatigue, Ushio seemed nonetheless satisfied to have secured her quarry.

"I bet. Those old wo—uh, I mean, those ladies who show up at the sales are ferocious," I replied from the bathroom as I changed out of my uniform. Ushio shifted her body to face me, now suddenly inquisitive.

"Have you ever had to deal with that before, Dad?"

"Sure have," I nodded, still behind the bathroom door. *"Whenever I got off work early, shopping in the evening was always a real struggle."*

"Wow. I guess I have to give you credit, Dad. I'm impressed."

Ushio feebly raised her hand in recognition of my apparent achievement. She had plenty of energy to spare for helping lost children and rushing to the store before, but now she was utterly spent. I actually found myself both slightly amused and strangely proud to see her in this state.

"Well, if you're that tired, why don't you let me handle the rest? Looks like all that's left to do is to reheat it and serve." Ushio finally raised her head.

*"I appreciate the offer, but I said I'd take care of dinner today and I meant it—**oof!**"* she protested, rising from the table with a short grunt of tired effort.

"Give me a sec. I'll turn the heat back on."

"Then I'll set the table. That much is fair game, isn't it?"

She hesitated. *"...Okay. Thanks, Dad,"* she acquiesced as she donned her apron.

The added piece of clothing reminded me of Yoshino's comment about her ability as a homemaker. I was inclined to agree with him.

If Ushio had been just another girl—not my daughter—and I had met her before I met Nagisa, chances are I would have started crushing on her instead. Call it a silly hypothetical musing of an over-fond father.

"Okay, all ready."

"Good."

We sat at opposite sides of the table and put our hands together at nearly the same time.

"Thanks for the food," we chime together.

As I had requested, the menu tonight was ginger-fried pork. Ushio had also added the onions she mentioned, caramelized to an sweet dark brown, plus a healthy dose of vinegared seaweed and squid. The meal was rounded off with the standard rice and miso soup.

"The onions look perfectly done."

"Don't they?"

"It always takes me forever to get them to that point. Is there some trick to it that I don't know?" I asked.

"Well, of course it would take forever if you keep the heat low to avoid scorching them. The onions just sweat and turn clear if you do that."

"You even knew how I do it?"

My eyes widened in surprise upon realizing that she understood what I was doing just from watching my hands as I cooked. Ushio put on the face of a proud expert as she continued.

"I wasn't totally sure about that either at first. But yeah, that's all there is to it. Turn the heat up high from the start, hot enough to char them if you left them alone."

"Huh. I didn't know that."

What had begun as dinner cooked by my daughter had now become a practical cooking lesson for me.

"Onions aside, the rest of the dish tastes really good too. It smells...well, really good."

"Can you tell? I bought good meat, but I also went and bought some quality fresh ginger as well."

"Oho. I wouldn't have thought that just buying better ginger would make this much of a difference."

For me, normally the only ginger that could give off such an intoxicating smell would be the spicier variety. Having a milder, more flavorful kind instead was a pleasant change of pace.

"I got the best stuff on the shelf. It was actually cheaper than everything else they had thanks to the sale," Ushio explained.

"You really don't need to worry that much over it."

It made me feel uneasy to hear that Ushio was so concerned with the household finances—a job which fell to me by default—but I figured that she could use this knowledge for reference when she had her own checkbook to balance. In all honesty, Ushio had been tasked with handling the cash flow ever since she entered junior high, when she took effectively control of the whole operation. That was another matter, though. I put the matter aside in favor of a brighter topic.

"You were really cool today, you know," I praised her as we neared the end of the meal.

"Huh?"

"You know what I'm talking about. The thing with that lost girl."

Ushio's face softened in comprehension, but her hands tensed.

"I didn't do anything cool at all. Heck, if you and Yoshino-san hadn't been there, I would have been useless."

Her point, it seemed, was that Yoshino-san and I were the heroes of the moment for his fast work using his phone and my sharp eyes.

"But we would never have noticed any need to help if you hadn't brought her to us in the first place. The fact that you saw the problem and found the right solution is what I thought was cool."

"R-really?" She stuttered. "I...thanks, Dad."

Ushio blushed furiously at the compliment.



"Besides, weren't you the one who actually guided the girl to her parents? I saw how thankful they all were."

"Well, yeah, I guess. Wait, you were watching?"

"Yep. All the way up the point where you got all embarrassed and started bowing."

"Nooooo!" She groaned, rolling around on the floor. *"That's abusing your power as an electrician!"*

"What are you talking about? What's wrong with climbing up just to see how it went?"

"I mean, I guess that'd be okay, but it's just so embarrassing!"

She ceased her rolling and sat up straight as she admitted to her shame.

"At any rate, I'm glad you two could find them."

"Yeah, me too," she agreed, peering at me through squinting eyes before diving into an explanation. *"So actually, she told me that her parents were taking her to go visit the family grave. They were doing it for her grandfather. She said she loved him so much that she wanted to pick some pretty flowers for him."*

"So that's why they were out there?"

The girl must have been really attached to him when he was alive, I thought. It pained me to imagine how it must have felt to lose him at such a young age.

My heart sank further upon realizing that Ushio's own pain must be terrible, given the reminder that she had never known Nagisa.

"Don't worry about me, Dad. I'm fine."

Perhaps I had been wearing my feelings on my face. She had read them easily enough.

"And I'll always be fine as long as you're here, Dad."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I know that whatever problems I face, you'll be there to help me through them."

The words Ushio used were eerily identical, word for word, to the words I said to Nagisa in my dream from that morning.

"Uh, yeah...I'm glad you think so too."

The feeling that she was really our daughter—or rather, that we all were truly a family—had never been stronger in my heart.

"The girl from today said pretty much the same thing. 'I'll be okay now because Pama and Mama are here.'"

"Did she, now? Well then, she's a stronger one than I took her for."

"Every girl out there is strong, Dad. As long as they have someone who'll be there for them when they're not, at least," Ushio proudly declared with an air of unusual maturity.

"Yeah," I agreed. *"The same was true of Nagisa."*

We each served as the main pillar of support for the other. It wasn't clear when this became the case, but it was how we knew we were family.

"And that's how you and I are so strong too, eh?"

"I sure think so. And I think it's about time we did what that girl was doing today, Dad," she reminded me as she turned her head toward the drawers near the door.

"Yeah, I guess so," I conceded.

I mirrored Ushio and turned to gaze at the picture on the drawers.

We were long overdue for a visit to Nagisa's grave.

The graveyard where Nagisa rested was, in fact, not far at all from the apartment. Some years prior, a new cemetery had been established on a hill barely more than a block over, and with some insistence I had had her grave moved there soon after.

Hence where Nagisa now slept.

The view from that hill made for a splendid panorama. I wanted to go there to see it again, in front of Nagisa's resting place. The problem, to be frank, was that I was afraid of the bitter feelings that would surface while I stood there.

With Ushio coming along, however, I was sure that those feelings could be kept at bay.

And so, yes. We would make the visit as a family.

Yoshino-san's words from before cam to mind. He was right.

Whatever might come along that neither Ushio nor I could face alone, we would easily overcome it together.

"Hey, Ushio."

"Hmm?"

"Why don't we all go together?"

"'All?'"

"Yes, 'all.' That includes you, me, your grandparents, even my dad and Kyou and Sunohara. Everyone who knew Nagisa. That would be a trip worth making."

Nagisa and I had our own circle of friends, and Ushio surely had hers. I looked forward to seeing just how many new relationships Ushio might forge if we were to add my friends to the growing list of her own.

"That does sound nice," Ushio said, pondering the idea and nodding. *"Yeah, that's a great idea!"*

She abruptly rose from the table, knocking it with a clunk.

"I don't know why but I'm really looking forward to it now!"

"Take it easy, girl."

I opened and closed my palms automatically, while an involuntary grin broke out over my face.

I already knew what this feeling was, of course. It had simply been quite a while since the last time I had felt this fire of determination burning in me.

It was easy to see that Ushio shared the rush of emotion I was feeling. More intensely than I, in fact.

Meanwhile, I detected a feeling of joy, and perhaps relief, coming from Nagisa's face in the frame, though I knew nothing about the picture had changed.

Another facet of my memory from when Ushio and I decided to live together was when I held her hand in mine. Hers was so small and fragile then.

Try as I might, I couldn't remember the point when Ushio could finally wrap her fingers all the way around my hand. Perhaps it coincided with when she began to take the lead when we walked together without even holding my hand; that moment, too, escaped my memory.

Yet now when we walked together, Ushio led the way, briskly and with purpose, long hair trailing behind her. Each step carried the weight of her life's sorrows, but was propelled forward by everything that made her life brighter in spite of them.

And so I knew that my daughter wasn't helpless anymore. She could walk forward on her own. The kindergartener Nagisa was so worried about no longer existed. After seventeen years, I could be confident knowing that our little girl—or rather, the young woman before me grew up to be strong as we ever could have hoped her to be.

-end-


HEY, OKAZAKI.
First Choice
Second Choice
Third Choice
UHH, HELLO?
OKAZAKI?
HMM?
WHADDYA THINK YOU'LL BE DOING TEN YEARS FROM NOW, OKAZAKI?
Image of the Future
By: Juri Masaki
....
LEMME THINK.
WELL, IN TEN YEARS, I'D EXPECT YOU'LL HAVE EVOLVED ENOUGH TO WALK ON TWO LEGS, NOT FOUR. WHAT DO YOU THINK?
I'M TALKING ABOUT YOU, NOT ME!
AND WHAT EXACTLY ARE YOU IMPLYING ABOUT ME, HUH?!


ASK A STUPID QUESTION, GET A STUPID ANSWER.
WHY EVEN BOTHER ASKING THAT?
WELL, JUST LISTEN TO THIS, OKA-ZAKI~
RIGHT, SO, PICTURE KYOU. KYOU FUJI-BAYASHI.
UH-HUH.
I WENT AND ASKED HER THE SAME QUESTION EARLIER. WHAT DO YOU THINK SHE SAID?
...HM, GOOD QUES-TION.
I LIKE TO PICTURE MYSELF RUNNING A DAY CARE FOR KIDS. WHAT DO YOU THINK?
CAN YOU BELIEVE IT, MAN!?
THAT HAR-BINGER OF DOOM AT A DAY CARE?!
くわっ
...I'M SURPRISED SHE ACTUALLY TOLD YOU THAT EASILY.
WELL, OBVIOUSLY IT TOOK SOME CONVINCING FIRST!!
SO ANYWAY, THEN I SAID TO HER,
A DAY CARE? ARE YOU SURE YOU DON'T MEAN A WRESTLING RING?!
GET IT?
YEAH... I SEE SHE DID TOO.


BUT YEAH, IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE HER TAKING CARE OF KIDS.
I KNOW, RIGHT?! WHAT A JOKE!
WELL, I...
OH!
HEY, REP!
AH—
ドサッ
OH, UM, OKAZAKI-KUN, SUNOHARA-KUN, I CAN'T GIVE YOU MY MATH NOTES THIS TIME...
UH... SORRY, I DIDN'T CALL YOU FOR THAT.
HEY, YOU'RE JUST THE RIGHT PERSON TO ASK!
RIGHT, SO, IS KYOU SERIOUS ABOUT WORKING AT A DAY CARE?
HMM? OH, YOU MEAN MY SISTER?
WELL, Y-YES, IT'S BEEN HER DREAM TO DO IT FOR A LONG TIME NOW...
I ALREADY ASKED FOR THOSE SHEETS EARLIER SO I COULD SUBMIT THEM. YOU GUYS HAVEN'T DONE THEM YET, HAVE YOU?
UH, WELL, NO...
Did we miss that?
yep.
WELL, OUR SHEETS ASIDE...WHAT ABOUT YOU? DO YOU HAVE SOMETHING IN MIND CAREER-WISE?
OH, YES!
I WANT TO BECOME A NURSE, SO I THINK I'LL GO TO A NURSING SCHOOL ONCE I GRADUATE HERE.


...MEANING YOU'RE GOING TO COLLEGE.
Y-YES!
WELL, THIS IS A COLLEGE PREP SCHOOL, SO IT MAKES SENSE.
EVERYONE SEEMS TO HAVE DECIDED THEIR FUTURES, BESIDES US...
ははは…
ずーん
......!
WE CAN'T JUST IGNORE THIS, MAN!
COME ON, OKAZAKI, WE'RE GONNA DO SOME RESEARCH!
HEY NOW...
...MY DREAM?
FOR THE FUTURE, YOU MEAN? HMM...
WELL, I SUPPOSE I HAVEN'T DECIDED FOR SURE QUITE YET.
BUT IF I HAD TO SAY SOMETHING, I'D GO WITH A JOB WHERE I CAN BE AS USEFUL AS POSSIBLE TO OTHERS!


SOMETHING INVOLVING READING BOOKS...
I'D LIKE TO RUN A SHOP OR SOMETHING LIKE WHERE ALL OF MY VISITORS CAN JUST RELAX AND CHEER UP~
THAT'S A DIFFICULT TOPIC! I DON'T GET IT!
BUT IF I HAD TO CHOOSE, I IMAGINE DOING SOMETHING THAT'S REALLY EASY AND FUN EVERY DAY!
NOOOO! I REFUSE TO ACCEPT THAT I'VE GIVEN THIS AS MUCH THOUGHT AS THIS CLUELESS LITTLE GIRL!!
You're very rude.
なっ
HOLD ON, NOW. DIDN'T TOMOYO SAY SHE HADN'T PICKED A CAREER EITHER?
がばっ
MAYBE NOT, BUT WANTING TO BE OF USE TO PEOPLE IS DAZZLING ENOUGH TO COUNT!
KOTOMI ICHINOSE IS A STRAIGHT-UP GENIUS ON A DIFFERENT LEVEL THAN US AND YUKINE-CHAN SEEMS ALREADY SET ON WHAT SHE WANTS TO DO.
DON'T SAY IT LIKE THAT, MAN...
We're so lame...


HI, TOMOYA-KUN, SUNO-HARA-SAN!
WHAT ARE YOU TWO SIGHING ABOUT OVER HERE?
NAGISA!
AHA! NAGISA-CHAN!
IF YOU DON'T MIND ME ASKING, WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN TEN YEARS?
HUH? TEN YEARS?
THEY PASSED OUT THOSE CAREER FORMS IN YOUR CLASS, DIDN'T THEY?
WE WENT AROUND AND ASKED ALL OUR OTHER FRIENDS AND SURPRISINGLY, THEY ALL MORE OR LESS HAVE A PLAN IN MIND FOR THE FUTURE.
SO WHAT ABOUT YOU, NAGISA-CHAN? I KINDA FIGURED YOU PROBABLY HADN'T DECIDED YET, LIKE US.
MY... CAR-EER?
SO BASICALLY, YOU MEAN MY DREAM FOR THE FUTURE?
I MEAN, THERE IS SOMETHING I THINK I'D LIKE TO BE.
FOR REAL?! WHAT, WHAT?!
WELL, UM...


AH!
IT'S... KINDA EMBARRAS-SING SO IT'S A SECRET FOR NOW!
.....
WELL... I'M PRETTY SURE I KNOW WHAT IT IS NOW.
WELL THIS SUCKS.
NEITHER OF US REALLY HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT WE WANT TO DO IN LIFE.
YEAH, I BARELY EVEN KNOW WHAT I WANT TO DO NEXT YEAR, MUCH LESS NEXT DECADE.
Yeah, same.
AT ANY RATE...
I ALREADY KNOW THAT THERE'S NO POINT THINKING ABOUT IT.
MY FUTURE WILL BE DARK AND MUDDLED AS LONG AS THAT OLD MAN IS AROUND.
.....
I'VE SPENT A LOT OF TIME WORRYING OVER MY PLANS FOR LIFE AFTER SCHOOL TOO...
BUT IF YOU'VE EVER THOUGHT "I MIGHT LIKE BECOMING THIS" OR "I'D LIKE TO BE ABLE TO DO THIS," THEN YOU'VE AT LEAST GOT PART OF AN ANSWER RIGHT THERE, DON'T YOU?


OKAY THEN... I GUESS THAT MEANS WE'RE NOT TOTALLY OUT OF IDEAS.
BUT THINKING BY THAT LOGIC JUST AMOUNTS TO UNREA-LISTIC DREAMS.
IF I WERE TO SAY WHAT I "DREAMED" OF DOING, PEOPLE WOULD JUST LAUGH AT ME.
ははは
は…
NO, I WOULDN'T.
YOU'RE FREE TO WISH FOR WHATEVER YOU WANT. BELIEVING IT'S POSSIBLE BRINGS YOU ONE STEP CLOSER TO MAKING IT A REALITY.
SO IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW OUTLANDISH IT MAY SOUND. IT'S NEVER SOMETHING TO RIDICULE YOU FOR.
I KNOW YOU BOTH HAVE AT LEAST ONE THING YOU'VE DREAMED OF DOING.
NAGISA-CHAN...
じーん…
I'VE GOT IT! I'LL BELIEVE IN MYSELF FROM NOW ON!
I'M GONNA FIND MYSELF A BEAUTIFUL OLDER WOMAN TO BE MY SUGAR MOMMA, JUST WATCH!
WHA—
YOU IDIOT...


WHAT IF SHE'S RIGHT?
WHAT IF WISHING FOR IT CAN LEAD TO IT COMING TRUE?
I WANT TO ESCAPE THIS TOWN.
I WANT TO LIVE IN SOME UNKNOWN TOWN, FREE, ALONE, UNBOUND TO ANYONE.


USHIO~
PAPA!
Yay!
HERE I AM! WERE YOU A GOOD GIRL TODAY, USHIO?
YEP!
WE'RE HOME, SHIO-CHAN!
WELCOME HOME, MAMA!
You too?
I just finished work.
C'mere, Shio-chan!
ぴょん
OH, WELL NOW.


NAGISA, TOMOYA-KUN, YOU'RE BACK!
AND YOU BOTH ARRIVED AT THE SAME TIME!
HEY, SANAE-SAN.
I ACTUALLY JUST FINISHED UP ON MY END AND CAME STRAIGHT HOME.
SORRY FOR MAKING YOU BABYSIT.
WE BOTH HAD TO GO IN TO WORK TODAY, SO...
Nagisa's part-time, and...
AHAHA, NO WORRIES. I LOVE PLAYING WITH USHIO.
HERE, PAPA!
OH? WHAT'S THIS?
BREAD! I MADE IT WITH SANAE-SAN!
IT'S FOR YOU!
ISN'T THAT WONDERFUL! IT LOOKS JUST LIKE WHAT WE SELL AT THE BAKERY, SHIO-CHAN!
YEAH! I'M GONNA BE A BAKER WHEN I'M OLDER!
感動!!
OHH!
....
ACTUALLY, SINCE SANAE-SAN MADE IT, COULD THIS...?
NO WORRIES, KIDDO.
I WAS WATCHING THE WHOLE TIME. NONE OF HER WEIRD INGREDIENTS WENT INTO THE BREAD THIS TIME.



UH... SANAE-SAN IS STANDING RIGHT THERE, YOU KNOW.
Why'd you say it so loud?
N'WUH?!
ぐすっ
M-MY BREAD...
D-DO YOU...
DO YOU DISTRUST MY BAKING SKILL THAT MUCH?!
WAAAAH
OF COURF NOT! I RUF IT!!
だだだ
THERE THEY GO AGAIN, CRAZY AS ALWAYS.
I GUESS WE'LL HEAD HOME, NAGISA.
ニコ ニコ
はぐっ
モグモグ
ムシャムシャ

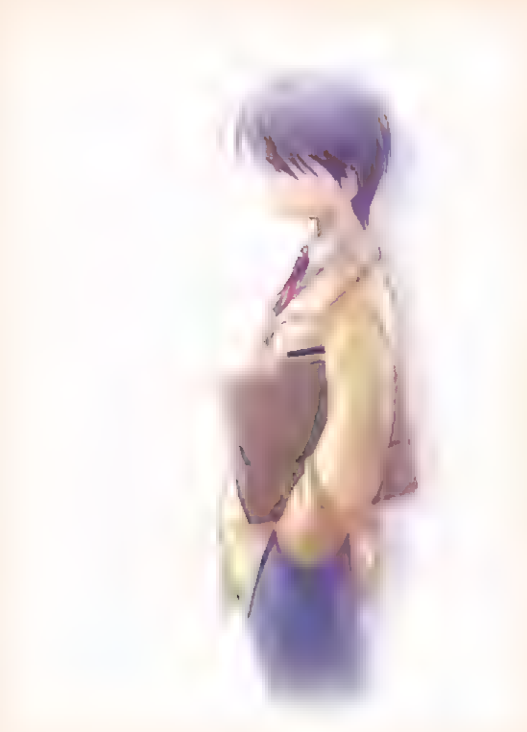

モグモグ…
IT'S DELICIOUS! YOU'RE A GENIUS AT EVERYTHING YOU DO, USHIO!
HEE, HEE. ALL YOU SAY IS GOOD STUFF, PAPA!
BECAUSE IT'S THE TRUTH!
Doting Father
I WAS STARVING, SO THAT REALLY HIT THE SPOT, USHIO.
HEHE. I'M SURE YOU CAN BE A GREAT BAKER WHEN YOU GROW UP, SHIO-CHAN.
YEAH!
REA-LLY?
YOU'VE ALREADY DECIDED YOUR FUTURE THIS EARLY?
I BET SHE'LL BE THE BEST-SELLING BAKER IN TOWN!
DEFINITELY! SHE'S GONNA SELL OUT EVERY DAY!
Double Doting
....
OH...
THAT REMINDS ME, NAGISA...
YES?
YOUR DREAM CAREER WAS TO BE MY WIFE WASN'T IT?
WHA—
WHAT?!
HOW DID YOU KNOW THAT, TOMOYA-KUN?!
AHA...
WELL, YOU BASICALLY STRAIGHT-UP TOLD ME BACK IN HIGH SCHOOL...
It was pretty obvious at the time...

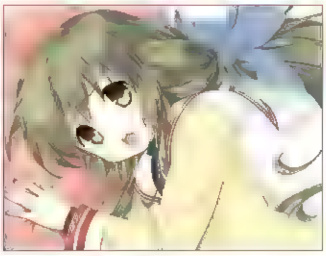

DID I REALLY? I DON'T REMEMBER THAT. HOW EMBARAS-SING...
WELL, I ONLY JUST REMEMBERED IT MOMENT AGO MYSELF.
WHEN I THINK BACK TO HIGH SCHOOL, IT'S HARD NOT TO NOTICE HOW MUCH THIS AREA HAS CHANGED.
BACK THEN, I ONLY EVER THOUGHT ABOUT GETTING THE HELL OUT OF HERE
BUT.
NOW, NOT SO MUCH.
I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE IT'S BEEN TEN YEARS.
I NEVER EXPECTED THAT OUR LIFE WOULD TURN OUT THIS WAY.
I DIDN'T EITHER.
I HAVE YOU, USHIO, AND YOUR PARENTS, TOO...
NOW, I CAN'T IMAGINE LIFE WITHOUT ANY OF YOU.


BUT THE JOURNEY'S NOT QUITE OVER YET, TOMOYA-KUN.
USHIO'S GOING TO BECOME AN ADULT,
FALL IN LOVE,
GET MAR-RIED,
AND HAVE KIDS OF HER OWN.
THERE ARE STILL PLENTY OF FUN AND HAPPY TIMES TO BE HAD.
LIFE GOES ON, YOU KNOW?
I THINK IT'S ALL A PROCESS WHERE WE TAKE THE HAPPINESS WE HAVE AND MULTIPLY IT MANY TIMES OVER.
....
THAT SOUNDED REALLY WISE.
SHE'S GOING TO GROW UP FASTER THAN WE'LL REALIZE. I'M SURE IT'LL CATCH US BY SURPRISE.
SHE MAY BE RIGHT


WHAT WILL WE BE DOING ANOTHER 10 YEARS FROM NOW?
HOPEFULLY WE'LL HAVE DONE WHAT NAGISA SAYS, MAKING OUR LIVES THAT MUCH HAPPIER.
BELIEVING IT'S POSSIBLE BRINGS YOU ONE STEP CLOSER TO MAKING IT A REALITY.
MAYBE IT'S TRUE. WOULDN'T THAT BE A DELIGHT?
NOW YOU'VE GOT ME IN THE MOOD TO REMINISCE.
NOW I WANT TO MEET ALL OF OUR HIGH SCHOOL FRIENDS AGAIN.
YEAH, BUT GETTING EVERYONE TOGETHER MIGHT BE A LITTLE HARD—
Oh!
WELL... GOOD NEWS! IT MIGHT HAPPEN SOON AFTER ALL.
OH, REALLY?
わあっ
THERE IT IS
I HOPE FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE
BECAUSE SEEING NAGISA SMILE IS MY MOTIVATION TO WORK FOR IT
Reunion Party Announcement!
Details
Cover charge

Message

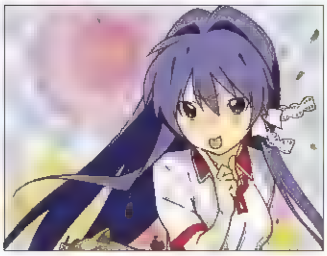



024
Misaki Sakura


018
Akihiro Kimura


012
Tetsuya Ouno


006
No.108

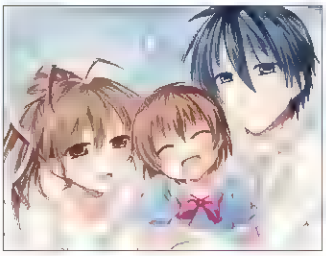

025
Yuuya Sasagiri


019
Crowe


013
Kouji Ogata


007
Yuriko Asami

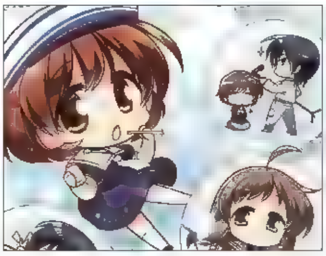

026
Shaa


020
Komoda


014
Kazuma


008
Jun Ikeda


027
Ayumu Shouji


021
Haruka Komowata

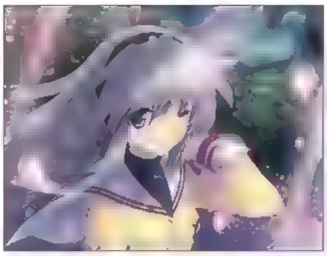

015
Hinata Katagiri


009
Rei Izumi


028
Suu


022
Sakiyoshi Cake


016
Yukimaru Katsura


010
Eiji Usatsuka


029
Narumi Suzui


023
Sakuraneko


017
Ao Kimishima


011
Ouji


048
Puchi Morishima


042
Madoka Hirose


036
Elan Hasumi


030
Sumisuzu


049
Yuugen


043
Rino Fujii


037
Mari Hamada


031
Yukiko Sumiyoshi


050
Yura


044
Fumio


038
Sou Hamayumiba


032
Nobuyuki Takagi


051
nyanya


045
Misakuranankotsu


039
Mashiro Hiiragi


033
Natsuki Tanihara


052
Hiroshi Tamaru


046
Takehito Mizuki


040
Yayoi Hizuki


034
Chou Higaashiguchi


053
GotoP


047
Miyoshino


041
Nonoka Hinata


035
Bakutendou


072
Ura


066
Chisuke


060
Sen Miyai


054
Yoshitaka Satomi


073
BYOI


067
Mauve


061
Mozuyun


055
Fuurai

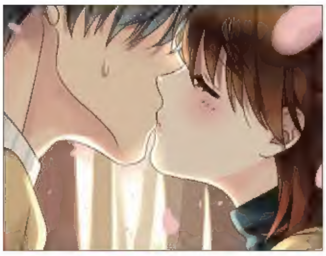

074
Shiva


068
KsuK


062
Cross


056
Makiemon


075
animato


069
MAHA


063
Touma Fujishiro


057
[yae]


076
Orange Glasses


070
Kotobuki-san


064
Amana


058
Mana


077
Bai Si Shao Nian (ˊ•ω•ˋ)


071
Mizu Umino


065
Takumi


059
Ui

~CLANNAD 10th Anniversary Art Book~

Trails of Light


083
Chitetan


078
Popuri Yoshikita


084
Mogupuchi


079
Amayofuu


085
Koage


080
lif

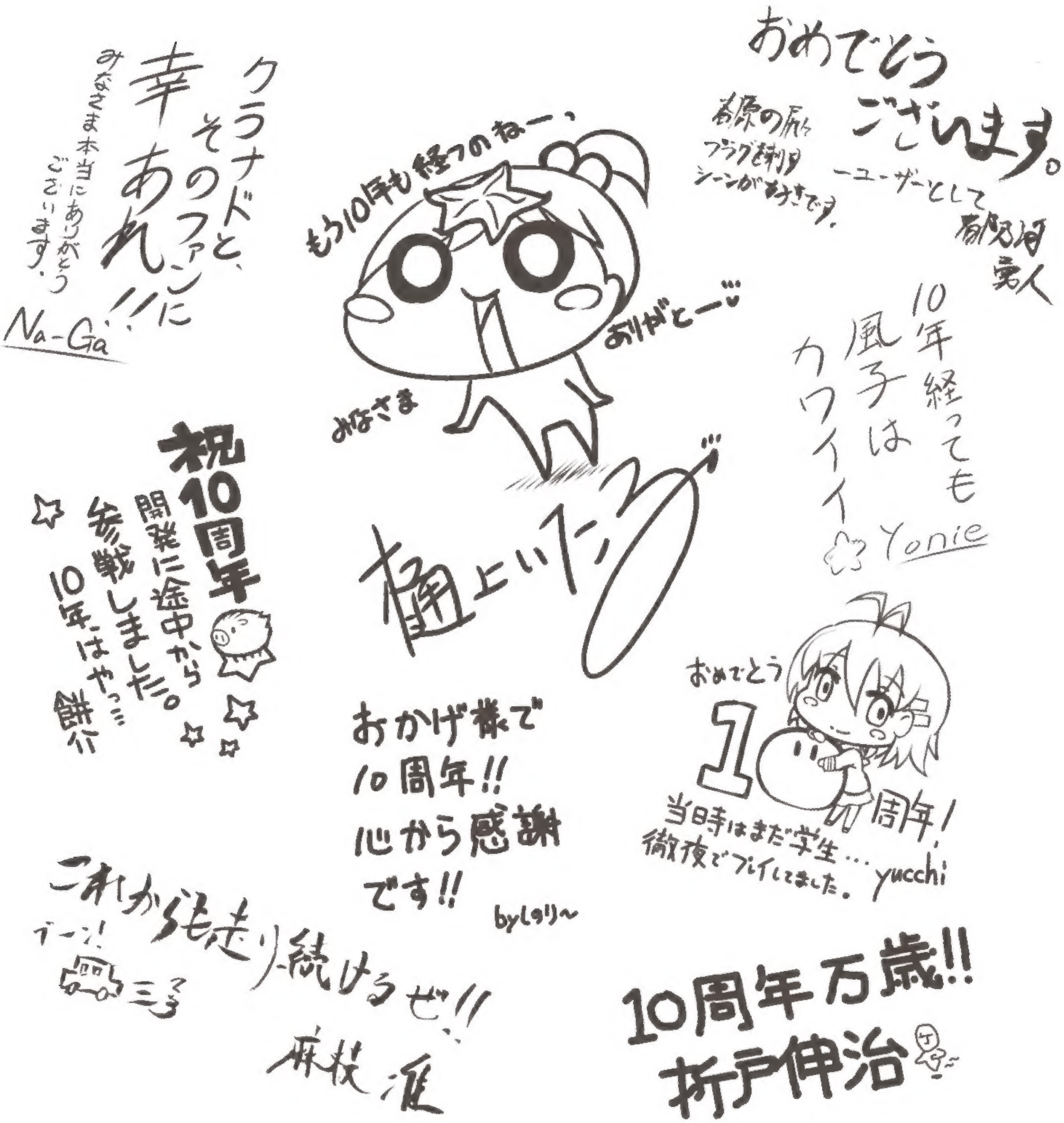


086
Captain Yue


081
Tateshina


087
An


082
Ekusuyo



Special Thanks

There are a great number of people we would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to. Our deepest thanks to each of you for your assistance in making this project a success.

- All of the guest illustrators who contributed to this artbook

- Pixiv
- Movic
- Toei Animation
- Dengeki G's Magazine's Editorial Department
- Crenter

- Niki Hideyuki
- ZEN
- Leo Kashida
- Fuyuichi
- Ogura Masayuki
- Yuhazu

Trails of Light ~CLANNAD 10th Anniversary Art Book~

Original Publication Date: 8/9/2013

Producer .... Key
Director .... Yoshikuni Toyoizumi
Coordinator .... Matthias Werner
Assistant Director/Editor .... Hirokazu Mayuzumi (Paradigm)
Designer .... Nobuo Seto (Twinkle)
Shingo Tabuchi (Twinkle)
Printing .... Kansai Art Printing Inc.
Publishing .... Takahiro Baba
Publishing Office .... VisualArts
VA 1st bld. 2-12-16 Honjo Nishi.Kita-ku, OSAKA City, 531-0073 Japan.

Sekai Project Localization Team:

Editor .... Evan Mapoy
Translator .... Eric Sanders
Typesetter .... Meiru
Digital Preparation .... Mike Hall